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The Sport from

Hard-Luck

OR,

BUMMER BILLY'S BLUFF.

A STORY OF THE

Touchstone Mine at Breakneck.

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AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

"What is it, old fellow? Surely not—easy! Go easy, now!"

Arthur Crossley stooped a little in his saddle, one hand tightening reins as the other soothingly patted the sweat-damp neck of his good steed, keen eyes flashing uneasy looks from side to side, from front to rear, while ears were

"DROP THAT ROPE, YE-HOUN'-DOG, OR I'LL BLOW A RED LANE CLEAN THROUGH THE HEAP," CRIED BUMMER BILLY, THE TRAMP DETECTIVE.

strained to catch the first inkling of an almost superstitiously dreaded peril.

Twilight had long since deepened into night, but the rising moon was sending streaks and patches of light to blend oddly with the shadows, forming many a weird picture there among the tempest twisted trees and dwarfed shrubbery, the towering crags and sun-bleached boulders, until even a man with wholly unshaken nerve might easily have conjured up armed enemies skulking and creeping his way, on murder bent.

The Touchstone foreman felt his horse quivering, and more than ever was assured that peril threatened—not so much to his life as to the precious charge of which he now was sole guardian.

And yet, how could it be? Cunning though those human devils were, how could they possibly have anticipated his movements?

Instead of taking the regular stage from Capsheaf to Breakneck, as one would naturally suppose, Crossley, on horseback, had diverged widely from the usual route, finally striking into the long-abandoned trail by which the silver camp was originally reached.

Yet now—was it a false alarm, or had his horse with still keener senses detected danger as yet unseen by his master?

Failing to see aught to confirm his fears, Crossley urged his steed ahead with a slight prick of the spur. A couple of nervous strides, then another shying which carried both horse and rider into a clearly lighted space free from rocks or bushes.

Again the horseman flashed keen looks around, swaying in the saddle with easy motion, and thus unwittingly foiling his as yet unknown enemy.

One of yonder shadow-masked bushes seemed to spring into sudden life; but, even as Crossley caught sight of this, he felt a coil of rope brushing past his face and breast, missing his head, but falling over that of his horse, as the frightened animal nervously yielded to those tightening reins and coming back almost upon its haunches.

Swiftly the ambushed rider acted, now knowing that it was to do or die, dropping rein to snatch weapons from the leather belt about his middle, one hand flashing a keen blade across that tightening rope even as his other flung revolver to a level.

As by instinct he covered the man with the rope, but, just as his finger contracted the lasso gave way, and though shot and fall seemed simultaneous, Arthur knew that his enemy was not killed, if even struck at all.

Set free from that choking noose, the horse plunged forward with a snort of affright, his sudden action hindering the aim which might have bettered that initial shot.

A savage curse came from the tumbling mass, and swiftly came the threat:

"Halt, ye cur! Hold up or croak, curse ye!"

A flash lit up that spot of gloom, and Crossley felt the wind of flying lead as the shot hummed close to an ear.

He bent forward close to the horse's withers, raking flanks with spurs as he urged the good steed on, out of the moonlight and into the shadow, whistling lead and barking powder keeping time to his motions.

More like coward than hero fled the foreman, lying low as possible in the saddle, until at length the good horse swung around an abrupt bend in the trace, and so was beyond reach of shots and curses.

Then Arthur Crossley rose erect in his saddle, while a low muttered "Thank God!" escaped his lips. And though he slackened pace, not until more than half a mile had been placed behind them did he bring his nag down to a walk.

A coward?

Far from it!

Where but life alone was concerned, few men living could or would have faced

death with firmer front or cooler nerve than this same foreman of the Touchstone Mine; but now he held a trust, which he deemed far more sacred than his own life, and acted accordingly.

"Who was it?" he asked himself as he looked keenly around on all sides, making sure no enemy was within eye-range before reloading and replacing his revolver. "Surely not the same outfit, for I saw but the one, and they would—yet, who else would play such an evil game?"

The horse seemed as ill at ease, and with a toss of its head gave an impatient whinney.

"Good boy!" patting neck with loving hand as he permitted the intelligent creature to move on once more. "Only for you, back yonder, my neck might have caught the rope, and then—ugh!"

'Twas an ugly reflection, even for a brave man, and Arthur Crossley shivered as he rode on through the night, eyes in constant motion and keenly on guard lest further evil should befall.

It hardly seemed within the bounds of probability that a second trap should be sprung; and yet, why not, since the first had been laid?

"The devil, or one of his chosen imps, surely!" decided the troubled foreman as he rode on. "Who else could have made so close a guess at my movements? Who else—or could it have been a mere happen-so?"

No! He could have sworn that only one man living knew he intended to follow this long-deserted trace to-night, and that man was far above suspicion. So he told himself, now, and so he firmly believed, even while feeling that 'twould be simply impossible for any outsider to anticipate his movements that night.

"If not the devil himself, then Satan is backing their game!" was muttered as the foreman pressed forward. "I'm not superstitious, but—well, I'd give a year of my life-lease to be safely at Breakneck with—it—right now!"

Like many another good man who scoffed at the bare idea of being inclined to that weakness, Crossley was superstitious to a certain extent; and, when he rapidly ran over his past movements he surely had fair grounds for feeling somewhat off nerve.

So far as he knew, or so far as reason went, only one other man living had any knowledge of his purpose in leaving Breakneck for Capsheaf and points beyond.

Of course they might give a fair guess, knowing, as all the town did, how financial difficulties seemed closing in about the proud owner of the Touchstone, thanks to a series of heavy misfortunes which had befallen him of late, prominent among which may be named the loss of large sums in cold cash on two different occasions, by road agents.

"But they couldn't know, or even guess, how I meant to come back!" averred the rider. "Nobody knew I had a horse in Capsheaf. I booked for a place in the regular stage, and kicked like a bay steer when I seemingly missed it by a hair. So, how could they know?"

That was the puzzle, and one which troubled the handsome young foreman more than such thoughts could fairly express.

Granting that he had been noticed while leaving Capsheaf in the saddle, who could have guessed that he meant to take another than the regular road to Breakneck? Who could have guessed his purpose, and at the same time cut ahead far enough to lay a trap for his undoing?

Only one other man was in the secret of his plans, and that other the father of the woman Crossley hoped to make his wife—that other the man to save whose financial credit this desperate venture was being made.

"Even if he wasn't—but, he is honest as the day is long!" almost fiercely asseverated the foreman as that ugly

thought forced itself upon an unwilling brain. "Don't I know? And Phillis—God bless her!"

Mental spur was answered by material ones, and under the double impulse more rapid progress was made until the horseman came to a point where the trail divided, split by what appeared by that uncertain light to be the beginning of another mountain range.

Crossley knew that either branch would conduct him to the silver camp, while there was little to choose as to distance; but—hark!

A sound came from the rear, apparently from no great distance; a sound which, under ordinary circumstances, would hardly have been noticed, but now sent a curious thrill of half superstitious fear through the foreman's veins.

He knew that the man of the lasso could not possibly have won so near without other than his own legs to carry him, yet almost as surely that was a signal of some sort, for—listen!

An answering sound from ahead!

A faint whistle, ordinarily might have passed for the sleepy call of some night-bird, but now—

Crossley mechanically turned more toward the right hand trace, for his alert sense of hearing told him that the sound came from the other branch—a sound which found its indistinct echo further to the rear.

The horse pushed forward a few strides, only to be jerked back with an iron grip and held all atremble while its rider looked and listened, heart thumping furiously.

Was the right branch clear, or was this but part of a foul trick to accomplish his undoing? Could he ride through to safety and honor, or was there a masked pitfall in the way?

Fighting these ugly doubts as best he might, Crossley both looked and listened, hand on pistol-butt in readiness for defense of his trust.

Something stirred over yonder, just where a band of bright moonlight lay across the old trace—something reaching that impalpable barrier, recoiled as though afraid to cross.

Arthur saw it, but only to lose the dim vision amidst those shadows as quickly.

Was it man or beast? Was it—ha!

The solution came. The phantom-like shape sprung forward to cross the band of moonlight at a bound, but slipped and fell in an awkward sprawl, plainly betraying itself.

At almost the same instant a half-stifled curse broke from the shadowy rear, accompanied by a metallic clink, as of gun or pistol in contact with a rock.

No room for further doubt, now, and Crossley gave his horse free rein, sending him along the right-hand trace at more than half speed.

"Careful, boy!" in warning, steadying the nag with reins while bending in saddle and holding his pistol ready for emergency. "A trip or a stumble now might—ha!"

Shouts and cries from both rear and left hand, which could be made only by a recklessly rushing enemy, who saw their coveted prey slipping through their clutches.

One glimpse of those enemies, then further view was cut off by the rocks upon whose point the old trace had split asunder; a glimpse which showed them dashing furiously through moonlight and shadow.

Yet, though it now seemed that his enemies were thrown to the rear, Crossley was far from feeling jubilant, and instead of urging his mount ahead, as one would naturally do in a race for dear life, he tightened the lines, and, holding revolver between thigh and pomel, he used both hands in knotting the reins close to the neck of his steed.

"Now, steady, boy!" he commanded, at the same time arming each hand with trusty revolver. "If it's clear sailing we'll get there in a hurry. If not—well,

we'll have a bit of fun while trying, anyway. So now for it, lad!"

A touch of the spurs sent the animal down to a steady gallop, which devoured space with comforting rapidity.

The Touchstone foreman felt far from assured that there was a clear path ahead, and knowing how surely those pounding hoofs were heralding his coming, he rather more than half expected a hail or a shot at each successive leap.

"The devils! Would they leave me such a choice as this? Would they block one way, and leave the other open? Or, was it pure accident that showed their hand, back yonder?"

Even while trying to doubt, Crossley was convinced, but what other course was left open to him?

He could see that all retreat was cut off, and, unless he should abandon his mount, only a single line of flight lay open for him—a flight straight ahead along that deserted trail, where a deadly ambushade might be planted at any rod of its length; but, in grim desperation he rode on, right hand and left gripping pistol-butt, with forefingers touching trigger in readiness for a snap-shot which might make all the difference between success and failure, life and death.

He could hear voices shouting and cursing as the pursuers came on in furious pursuit, and, later, he even caught indistinct glimpses of human shapes where the moon shone more clearly.

So far not a sound had come from the front, and his keenest glances failed to detect aught of danger to himself or to his important charge; but he would not know rest or relief until he should reach Breakneck and fairly acquit himself of that sacred trust.

Would that ever be?

A few rods further ran the horse, sure-footed as a cat, in spite of the rough way, and Crossley was just turning head from another glance toward the rear, when the dreaded trap was sprung for his undoing!

Just a glimpse did he catch, but 'twas too late to foil that snare, and, though a cry of fury burst from his lips, it came only as he himself went down before the concealed enemy.

Just where the trace ran between a double fringe of bushes, smooth and level, the trap was sprung—a strong rope lifting across the trail, but a second or two before the galloping horse was fairly upon it.

With a snort of affright the animal tripped and went down, plunging awkwardly forward, pitching rider out of saddle as stone from catapult, to strike the stony way with cruel force, both weapons exploding from involuntary touch while yet in midair.

Although taken so completely by surprise, Crossley fell clear of the plunging steed and struck fairly upon his feet, still gripping his smoking revolvers, as a clear, stern voice called out:

"Take him, lads! dead or alive!—take him!"

CHAPTER II.

A BRISK LITTLE SKIRMISH.

Sorely shaken and partially benumbed by the heavy shock, Arthur Crossley saw a number of phantom-like shapes rushing his way, and hardly knowing what words crossed his lips, he gave hoarse warning:

"Back, ye devils—back!"

"Down him, boys!" repeated the leader of that squad, at the same time springing toward the horse as it scrambled hastily up from its fall. "Down him, and lively!"

"Simmer or croak, blame ye!" from one of the ruffians, as he came with a rush. "We've got ye foul, and—"

Turning dizzy though he felt himself, the young foreman was anything but cowed.

"Back, ye devils! Back, or eat lead!"

His right hand rose with his threat, but ere it could fairly cover that burly

shape, a savage stroke turned the weapon aside and dashed it from his grasp, while at the same time a heavy weight fell upon his back, fierce fingers gripping at his throat.

A swift writhe and stooping twist flung that adversary aside, and broke his grip, even though it seemed as if his throat was being torn to bloody strips in that breakaway.

Then, more himself, as he began to realize the full extent of his peril, Crossley sprang forward to meet his challenger, sending out a hard-clenched fist as he came with such good will that the knave toppled over backward, feet higher than his head as he struck earth on the broad of his back.

But the gallant fellow was permitted time for no more. Half a dozen knaves sprung upon him, fairly crushing him to earth in spite of his desperate struggles, some hands holding him impotent while others wrested away the weapons which he was even yet trying to use.

There could be but one ending to such an unequal fight, and when the leader rose to his feet after that stinging blow, he found the foreman lying prone upon his back, with strong hands fixed upon each of his limbs.

"You have him, then?"

"Bet yer life we hev! An' shell we keep, or shell we throw away es jest fitten fer coyote-bait, boss?"

"Let up, ye devils, or I'll—let up, I say!" gasped Crossley, striving to break away, yet with powers so hopelessly hampered that his enemies could afford to jeer.

"Lay putt, blame ye fer a contrairy warmint!" harshly growled one of the captors, as he turned eyes from master to captive. "Want to git an the wind shet clean out o' ye, hey? Want to—shell we jest politely croak the fool critter, boss?"

"Not yet. Pull his teeth against biting, then stand him right end upward. Since he can use his tongue we'll see that he makes good use of it. All right?"

"You bet yer sweetness he is all right! So! Climb up on yer hind legs, John Donkey—so fashion!"

With a heave and a toss the toughs picked their captive bodily from the ground, giving him a dizzying shake and toss before planting him squarely upon his feet in front of their leader.

The stalwart-looking chief now was standing before his human quarry, where the clear rays of the full moon fell fairly athwart his head and form, and Arthur saw a coarse, ill-fitting, ragged coat masking the upper portion of that athletic body, while a dark cloth with rudely cut eyelets hid his face from view most effectually.

"I thought there couldn't be any mistake," spoke the leader after a brief scrutiny.

"If you think—"

"Call it know, and you'll come nearer the mark, Mr. Crossley," interrupted the outlaw, one gloved hand placed upon a shoulder of the prisoner. "Shall I tell you just what all this means, my dear fellow?"

"You'll sup sorrow for this work, be sure of that much!"

"Chew 'that cud, if you fancy the flavor!" mocked the other. "As for us: listen, will you?"

Instead, Crossley began another vain yet furious struggle which gave his burly guards some little trouble to subdue, and wrought still uglier emotions in their breasts.

"Shell we mash him, boss? Durn the fool critter, anyway! 'Tain't him we're wantin' so mighty much as 'tis the pure quill which—eh?"

"Button that lip of yours, pardner. I'm doing the talking for this outfit just now, remember." Then, to his prisoner:

"Don't you make a nasty matter worse, young fellow. We not only know why you took this roundabout trip, but we know more: where's the boodle you're trying to sneak into Breakneck?"

"I haven't— What do you mean, anyway?"

"Business! I mean that you volunteered to run a wad of good money through the lines, to help old Dikeman through with his labor troubles. I know that this money is—where is it, you fool?"

"Are you crazy, sir?"

With all seeming innocence came this query, and it robbed the road-agent of all patience, for the time being.

"Hold the fool steady, lads!" he ordered, harshly. "I'll look for myself, unless—will you cough up, then?"

"I haven't ten dollars of my own with me."

"Bah! I'm after bigger game than that. The money you hoped to run in for old Dikeman is 'way up in the thousands, and that is what we want and what we're going to have, too! Now, where is it?"

"I have no such sum of money," steadily declared the prisoner. "If I had I'd never surrender it to such as you, save with my life!"

"Shell we strip him, boss?"

Already those hands were at work, searching the captive from head to foot, front and rear, everywhere a parcel of money could possibly find concealment.

Failing to find what he sought, the chief again spoke, his tones fairly a-quiver with savage rage and baffled avarice.

"What have you done with it, you cursed hound? I know that you had it—know that you were carrying to old Dikeman the money which— Oh! you whelp of Satan! Spit out the truth, or I'll have you murdered by inches! I'll—"

Rage choked his voice, and Crossley took opportunity to say:

"How can I surrender what I haven't got? Give me at least half a show, if there's a white man amongst ye. Let me have—"

"You'll hev it right whar the chicken ketched the hatchet ef ye don't cough 'er up, pardner!" grimly warned the burly brute, who had already shown a fluent tongue. "Whar's the dingbats which—"

As he ostentatiously flourished a huge revolver by way of backing up his words, he gave Crossley the very chance for which that person was watching and hoping.

With a quick jerk and twist the foreman freed his right arm, grasping that weapon and wresting it from its owner, who, the next instant, went down in an awkward heap; then, flinging off his amazed guards, Crossley sprung aside, at the same moment opening fire, though without any attempt at aim.

All was confusion, and with wild cries and curses the road-agents scattered.

Then the unexpected happened, no less to the surprise of the foreman than to his assailants.

With a clear, ringing cheer a fresh force came charging over the rocks north of the Old Trace—uncertain as to numbers, yet yelling like a score, and shooting like a dozen, at the very least. "Scatter out and pouch the net, lads! Don't let one of the imps get away!"

"Swipe 'em in, an' hyar I be fer to play Jedge Lynch on a bench with a quishion to it!" from another voice. "Whoop-up and whoop-er-ee! Hain't hed so much fun sence I ketched the eetch! Hain't seed so big a—chaw lead, ye pups!"

Shooting at every jump, the newcomers charged down upon the now demoralized road-agents, scattering them like chaff before a whirlwind.

One of their number spun dizzily around with upflung arms, to sink in a quivering heap beside a boulder, the white side of which was being sprayed with his hot life-blood.

With a savage curse the road-agent chief had knocked Crossley flat with a pistol-butt, but ere he could do more his men fled in dismay, as those shouting,

shooting enemies came rushing toward the spot.

It was a keen little skirmish, and fairly fatal for the forces engaged, as was quickly ascertained when the rescuers ceased their brief pursuit and turned back to take account of stock and sum up the situation.

In spite of the noise and bustle, there were only a couple of them in all, and both were chuckling at the comicality of the transformation scene when they came back to see three bodies lying there in the moonlight, two of them masked and roughly garbed, the third well dressed after the frontier fashion, and clearly the one held up by robbers.

There was an even stronger contrast between the two adventurers, as will be shown later on, for if one looked like a ragged, dirty, disreputable bum, the other certainly represented a gentleman Sport.

The latter hurried over to where Crossley was lying unconscious, while his companion shuffled from one to another of the road-agents, hands busier even than his husky tongue.

"Steady, there, Billy Bedad!" sternly reproved the Sport, as he noted those suspicious actions. "We're not thieves nor footpads, remember!"

"Who? Me?" ejaculated the surprised bum, with upheld hands to show their emptiness.

"What are you trying to do, then?"

"Lookin' to see ef ary o' these pore critters hed sense 'nough fer to tote a pocket-pistol, boss, an' that's honest Injun ef my name's Bummer Billy Bedad! An' sech dryness onto me, boss! An' sech a streak o' crooked luck onto me fer—"

Just then Crossley gave a long breath and a low moan of reviving senses.

"Come here, Billy, and lend a hand. If those gentry should take a notion to look back and see what a slender regiment we form, they might—easy, partner!"

"Devils—I'll never—die first!" panted the foreman, still bent on defending his trust.

But a few words from the stranger reassured Crossley, and seeing himself in friendly hands, the foreman cast an anxious look around, crying out as he failed to detect what he was searching for:

"My horse! Where is—my horse, I say!"

"Oh, that's all right, pardner," hastily assured the Sport, as Crossley staggered to his feet like one half-wild with anxiety. "They're running by ear, and won't find out just what's the matter until broad daylight, if even then. Why, man, dear—"

"My horse—I want my horse, I tell you!" passionately cried the foreman, struggling against the friendly hands which were swift to lend him support, really needed in his weakness just then.

He flashed wild looks around, and, failing to see aught of the animal he named, staggered like one drunken, hands flying up to clasp his head, as though to keep it from bursting, huskily uttering:

"Lost! All lost!"

His suddenly rallied powers appeared to fail him at once, and only for those friendly hands he must have fallen headlong to earth.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOTSPUR AND THE BUMMER FIND AN ALLY.

Past doubting Arthur Crossley was still suffering from the blow which had felled him, and his rescuers began to fear that far worse had befallen him than bodily injury.

Blood was trickling freely over his face from a scalp-wound where the bone had been laid bare by that pistol-butt, and the Sport was on the point of making another examination in expectation of finding a serious fracture of the skull, when again the young foreman rallied.

"Don't—I'm all right, so far as—only my horse is— Where is it, I say?" he

panted, struggling feebly to break from that friendly restraint.

"Oh, it's all right; safe as safe!" assured the Sport, after the manner of one who seeks to quiet a fretful child, while the seeming tramp tersely cut in with the words:

"Which is a turrible sight safer then we-uns be, jedgin' from—ef ye don't reckon that way, jest take a listen fer yer own selves, now!"

Certain sounds were coming back which plainly told the listeners that the road-agents had begun to recover from their panic, if not to actually rally for another assault.

Arthur Crossley could catch their scattered shouts and calls, and they served to rekindle a fire of vengeance which lent both voice and body renewed strength.

"The devils!" he cried, starting in that direction, while hands fumbled for the weapons which had been torn from him during that brief struggle. "They've got—I'll never—"

"Steady, pardner!" sharply warned the Sport, while ready hands caught and restrained the half-crazed foreman. "You'll never live to wear gray hairs if you plunge so recklessly. I love a free fighter, but you please me too mighty well right now!"

"Which is jest what," declared Bummer Billy, lending a hand of restraint. "We's only triplets, while they's a hull team. Go stiddy by jerks, boss, or billy-be-doodled ef we don't ketch what 'Poleon did at Waterloo, an' that isn't heaven!"

Crossley found himself helpless to break away from those friendly hands, and, realizing as much, gave submission, standing quiet and with lax muscles while eyes turned from face to face with a certain degree of curiosity.

"I don't know you," he said, speaking with an odd thickness of tongue far from usual with him.

"That's our loss, but we'll hope it won't last much longer," spoke the Sport, slackening his grip and looking to his pistols like one who anticipated their need ere long. "Loaded up, Billy?"

"Me guns is, but fer me—I say, boss," with sudden coaxing entering his tones, as he smiled fawningly into the foreman's blood-marked face, "you don't happen to hev no bottle nur flask nur nothin' like that, hain't ye? Ef ever I was dry fer a snort—"

"Cork it up, Billy!"

"Oh, ef I jest hed somethin' fer to cork! Ef I jest hed a ole corncob stopper fer to smell of! Ef I only—not even a drap, stranger?"

Despite his heavy burden of anxiety Crossley was forced to smile faintly, that plea so fitly matched the general appearance of this husky-toned stranger—a tramp from head to foot, and a bibulous tramp at that.

"If there's any liquor nearer this than Breakneck—"

"I'd break my neck fer a full snort, an' es fer a solid quart o' bug-essence—Oh, holy smoke! oh, holier sackerfidge!"

"Let up on that worn-out string, Billy!" sharply from his companion. "Hark! Those rascals are getting together once more, and we'll have a hefty contract on our hands unless— Reckon we'd better get a move on, don't you think, stranger?"

"I'd fight the lot if— Wait a bit!" cried Crossley, springing over to where the nearest of those bodies lay, stooping to tear away the cloth mask and turning the senseless head until the moon-rays fell fairly athwart the pain-distorted face.

"Ever see him before?" asked the Sport, close to his elbow, as the foreman gave a low, half-smothered exclamation.

"Yes. One of our men! A minute ago I could have sworn he was true as steel, while now—"

Breaking off like one who finds his emotions too powerful for easy control, Crossley passed on to the second corpse,

going through pretty much the same motions there, only this time drawing a freer breath as he failed to recognize the victim.

Then he grasped a brace of heavy revolvers which matched the stock of cartridges worn in the belt about his own middle.

"That's more like it! Now I can fight—"

"So can I, when I just have to, but just now I'd heap rather run for my little white alley," interposed the Sport, as still more ominous sounds came floating down the Old Trace. "If not for your own sake, pardner, then for ours. Let's take to cover!"

Crossley yielded far enough to follow the lead given, the trio quickly finding fair shelter amongst the gray boulders a little to one side, and some distance beyond the scene of that bloody hold-up.

Then, while waiting and watching, with guns in readiness for use in case an actual rush of the enemy, brief explanations were offered.

"It just happened so, you understand, pardner?" declared the Sport. "Billy and I—he's Billy Bedad, and I'm Hal Arlington, just down from Hard Luck—were padding the hoof for a change—"

"Bank busted, pockets empty, credit gone, an' oh! so dry in the thrapple!" croaked the tramp. "I'm Bummer Billy, an' he's Hotspur Hal! We're turrible good pards to tie to, but—divil a drink to the bunch o' us, an' the prospect growin' dryer be jerks!"

"Billy does the calamity howl and looks after the irrigation part of the programme, while I represent—"

"Call it windmill, an' leave 'er go at that," suggested Bedad.

The Sport laughed without show of resentment.

"Right there you have us, stranger. We were headed for Breakneck, across-lots. We lost our way, and we're belated. We camped out, and were just falling asleep when we heard this bit of a racket, then concluded to chip in, just for luck."

"An' never ketched a clam—nur a drap o' pizen, nuther, wuss luck we-all!"

As one who feels it a duty he owes, Crossley muttered his thanks for that timely aid, but if the strangers expected further explanations they were not forthcoming, for the words were still warm upon his lips when Crossley sprung erect with a low cry, holding up hand for attention while hearkening.

The neigh of a horse came from out the night, and waiting barely long enough to locate the sound, Arthur broke cover and rushed that way without asking aid or backing from his new friends.

"After him, Billy!" cried Hotspur, with just the suspicion of an expletive at this mad movement. "A crazy loon isn't a marker, but we can't afford to lose— Whoop 'er up, pardner!"

With no other idea than that 'twas his own missing mount which gave vent to that whinny, Crossley dashed onward, giving no thought to personal danger in his one desire—the recovery of his nag.

Soon, instead of coming upon a single nag, and that one his own, he rushed into a bit of clearing, where a number of animals were tethered, and, as he involuntarily recoiled, a harsh voice thundered forth:

"Down him, mates! Kill if you can't take, for he is—"

The words were drowned by pistol-shots, Crossley leaping back and aside to partly foil that sudden rush, his confiscated guns coming up to spit forth fire and lead in twin streams, then to find right gallant echoes, as the two pards jumped to the rescue for the second time that busy night.

Yells and howls, oaths and curses, cheers and threats, mixed up with pistol-shots and snorting of steeds, iron-shod hoofs smiting the stones as the frightened creatures reared and plunged against their tethers, while fiercely excited men ducked and dodged to save

even while trying their level best to slay.

Boldly though the trio fought, now shouting encouragement to one another, then yelling grim defiance to their mutual enemy, luck seemed against them, for the odds were far too heavy for so few to come off victorious, now they were at such close quarters.

But the fates willed otherwise, and just when it seemed as though the weaker party must go down in defeat, a fresh diversion came in the shape of pistol-shots from the rocks to the right, where loud voices fairly split the air, for, surely no single pair of lungs could have given birth to such varied sounds.

The road-agent chieftain gave a harsh yell as one of his death-stricken mates fell heavily against him, and clearly mistaking this involuntary cry for a defeated call, the road ruffians broke away in headlong flight, stopping not to pick and choose, but cutting loose the horses, and each one taking what came handiest.

Hotspur Hal and Bummer Billy redoubled their shouts at this, feeling far too thankful for such a timely reprieve to press the pursuit.

As for Crossley, a gun-stroke put him out of the race for the moment, and when he rallied, they were alone with the dead.

"Funny, isn't it, how much powder and lead a pack of fellows can get away with in a crazy mix-up like this, yet have so precious little to show for it?" cynically observed the Sport, as Crossley seemed to be taking notes of the field and its condition. "Just one stiff, and none of the others disabled! While we are—all right, Billy?"

"An' he hain't got nary a drap 'bout him, nuther! Right? All wrong, an' I hain't a-keerin' who hears me say so, nuther!" growlingly called back the bummer, as he turned away from the dead outlaw in sore disgust.

"Who was it—I didn't see—"

"You tell, for I don't know how," interposed the Sport from Hard Luck, catching the foreman's meaning, as Crossley looked half-bewilderedly around. "Whoever it was came in mighty good time, and made enough racket for a dozen; but as for the rest—"

Gripping an arm and forcing Arthur down to shelter of a convenient boulder, the Sport cocked pistol as the rapid trampling of a horse's hoofs came to their ears.

A few moments of suspense, then, as a phantom-like shape could be distinguished, the Sport rose up to sternly challenge over his gun:

"Who and what are you there? Talk white, and talk sudden, or you'll catch your last sickness, sure!"

"A friend," came the swift rejoinder. "Don't shoot, unless you're sorry I chipped to save you from death!"

"Then you are—"

Crossley gave a low, glad cry as the horseman came into a bit of moonlight, leaping recklessly forward as he recognized his horse.

"This is my— Who are you, anyway?" he cried, catching reins with one hand, while with the other he half-menaced the stranger with a revolver. "My horse—my—mine, I tell you!"

"Yours it shall be, then," readily yielded the tall stranger, swinging leg over pommel, and slipping to ground on the opposite side from the strangely excited foreman. "I picked it up on the loose but a few moments ago. It's not worth quarreling over, even if— Who am I? as though just comprehending your friend! The devil's brew is boiling hot, and you'll all sup sorrow with a long spoon if you try further this night!"

"You talk half-way white, anyway, stranger," put in the Sport from Hard Luck, coming forward, as Crossley seemed to have thought and care solely for his recovered mount. "What would you advise, for instance?"

"That you lie low until daylight,

rather than run the chances of blundering into other traps and snares the like of which— But come! There is no time to waste in chatter!"

"That's all right, pardner, but come whither or whence?"

A brief pause, as though for thought, then the words:

"There's Esau France, the cripple. You can find shelter under the roof of his shack for the rest of the night."

"If we saw like E-sau—but we're green as grass and clean strangers to the ins and outs of this diggings, don't you know? Now, for instance, how would you go about finding a place you hadn't even the ghost of an idea as to—"

"Come, if ye like; 'tis partly on my way, and I'll show you, rather than give yonder devils another chance to fatten on—come, then!"

With a gesture even wilder in semblance than were his swiftly-enunciated words, the stranger hurried away, followed, after a momentary hesitation by the trio, Crossley leading his horse by the reins.

"I say, pardner, you hain't got none o' the ginewine good ole stuff 'bout ye, hev ye?" coaxingly whispered Bummer Billy, as he tapped an arm on drawing closer to their queerly acting and speaking guide.

CHAPTER III.

CROOKED ESAU'S HOSPITALITY.

With all his apparent good nature and careless ease, few men alive that night owned a clearer brain or shrewder wit than Hotspur Hal from Hard Luck.

Although as yet wholly in the dark as to why the road agents were so desperately bent on downing the foreman of the Touchstone, he had both seen and heard sufficient to put his wits on the keenest alert, and readily as he appeared to accept the guidance of this unknown, he did so with a secret reservation.

Every movement of the stranger was closely noted, and at the faintest sign of treachery or crooked dealing, punishment swift and thorough would have overtaken the man who now led the way through those thick-lying rocks.

So far there were no signs of another attack by the road agents. So far as outward semblance went, their second repulse was a final one for the night, their demoralization being complete.

Little by little Arthur Crossley regained his composure, and while still clinging closely to his restored mount, he presently became able to understand the guarded whisper from Hotspur Hal.

"Who is Esau France, and where are we going? Do you know either man or place, pardner?"

Their guide certainly possessed ears of the finest, for he turned partly that way.

"Who of Breakneck doesn't know Crooked Esau? As for his mountain shack, where he and his son lives while—"

"I know both man and place," asserted Crossley. "We're not far off from there, right now, either!"

"Do you mean that, Crossley?"

"Yes. I recognize the landmarks now, and—but who are you, sir, since you appear to know me so well?"

"Ask yonder demons who had you foul when I came to the rescue," retorted their queer guide, with a wild gesture, as he sprang away. "Ask them—if ye ever find them living! Ha! ha! ha!"

Weirdly his laughter rung forth for a brief space, then died away into silence.

"Did you make him out, pardner?" asked the Sport.

"No, but—a friend, surely."

"It would appear so, judging from his efforts, back yonder," thoughtfully from the Sport. "And this Crooked Esau; what of him?"

"A queer, broken-down cripple, who has but little more wits than the law allows. He lives in a shack just across yonder. He has one son, who makes a rude sort of living for them both by hunting and fishing, then bartering at Breakneck for provisions and the like."

"Then you really reckon we'd be safe in following that fellow's advice? Not another plant, is it?"

"Oh, I can't think that. If meaning us evil, why should he chip in after that manner, when all was going against us?"

"That's pretty much what I want to know. Don't seem right to doubt one who has proven himself a friend in need, but, all the same, I just can't cotton to the critter! Eh, Billy Bedad?"

"Ef it's axin' me fer information, boss, this is pritty much the whyfo' of the whichness; ef that blame critter hain't the Ole Boy him own self, then he's shorely Satan's second cousin; so thar!"

Bummer Billy seemed very much in earnest, but his manner even more than his words caused the others to laugh, and that brief outburst served to clear the atmosphere.

Hotspur Hal was asking a few further questions when their stranger friend-in-need returned quite as swiftly as he had vanished. Speaking without preface in harsh tones, he said:

"If ye would know further of me or mine, time will tell it, but bear this much ever in mind: Joram Wheateroft is a true friend to all who are in the right, a bitter and uncompromising enemy to all evil spirits!"

"Devils are abroad this night howling for prey! Seek shelter if ye love life! Lie low lest you be laid too low for ever arising of your own accord! Take fair warning if ye be not purblind fools!"

He caught off his wide-brimmed hat with a flourish, turning a heavily-bearded face toward the clear moonlight, then again dashed away through the shadows with wonderful agility and sureness of tread.

"Who is he, now?" asked the Sport. "Crazy, or only cracked?"

"I can't tell you, for, to my knowledge, I never laid eyes on either face or figure before this very night," replied Crossley.

"Then it isn't the crack-brain you spoke of a bit ago?"

"What? Old France, or Crooked Esau, as people call him? Well, scarcely! When you clap eyes on the old codger, you'll need no further answer. Come! I know right where we are now, and there's a long gulch to be headed before we can strike the shack across yonder."

"Then you really think we'd better take his advice?"

"I really do. For one thing, 'tis a long road to Breakneck from here, and I'm beginning to feel dead tired. For another, I'd rather fight from under cover than out in the open, if fight further I must. And, besides, young France is full of grit, and knows how to shoot the head of a tack; two mighty good recommends for a side-pardner in a hot row, don't you think?"

"Well, I'm not famishing for blood which I have to supply, either by hands or by veins. Looks to me as though we might dodge better out in the open than while cooped up in a house. Still, anything to keep peace in the family. How is it with you, Billy?"

"Reckon thar's ary show fer ketchin' even a weenty drap o' drink over yen way, stranger? Goly host! I never was so turrible dry in all the sufferin' days o' my tormented life afo'—no, I never was, now!"

"Crooked Esau uses whisky to some—"

"Come on—fer love o' humanity, come on!" fairly howled Bummer Billy, lips smacking and throat gulping eagerly as he hurried forward until further progress was checked by a deep and fairly wide gulch which barred their way in that direction.

"Can we cross over, do you reckon, pardner?" asked Hotspur.

"By leaving the horse we might, but that I'll never do. Come; I can show you the way around. It isn't much farther, and is a mighty sight easier traveling."

Seemingly the question was settled without further debate, for the foreman acted as guide, followed closely by his recently made friends, making good his promise by presently rounding the gulch-

head and then taking them to a point whence their first view could be caught of the rude mountain hut.

All was dark and silent about the place, but Crossley seemed fairly familiar with his surroundings, and quickly led the way to the front door of heavy slabs, rapping sharply as he added voice to the summons:

"Hello, the house! France—Esau—Nathan France, I say!"

Sounds came from within, and after a sleepy voice demanded what was wanting, in response to which Crossley made known their needs, the fastening was removed and the door swung open.

Just then a home-made oil-lamp was lighted, its smoky rays affording sufficient illumination for their needs, showing a slender, white-faced, big-eyed youth picking at the charred wick, while a far less comely figure stood at the opening.

Right aptly was the old fellow dubbed Crooked Esau, for seldom did human eyes look upon a more bent and cruelly wryed form than he was cursed with.

Originally tall, if not shapely, Esau France was now bent with back almost forming a right angle to his lower limbs, head sunken into his shoulders, face looking like that of a living skeleton, so painfully thin it was, with sunken cheeks and receded eyeballs.

That face was beardless, but over forehead and ears fell still luxuriant hair of silvery whiteness, and crippled in limb and body until locomotion without a cane in either hand seemed far beyond his powers, Esau still contrived to hobble around after a fashion of his own.

"Come in, come in, and welcome to all we've got, gentlemen!" he said, in tones which fitly matched his distorted person, so cracked and rasping they sounded just then, backing away from the door like a crippled crab, his metal-shod canes rattling against the floor as though shivering with the same palsy which afflicted their owner.

"You know me, Mr. France?" asked Crossley, with a smile and a nod toward the younger inmate. "How d'y", Nathan. Pretty late for callers, but maybe we can make it all up to you, eh?"

Like one frightened the young man turned away, sinking down in a darker corner, hiding his face in his crossed arms without response to that cheery greeting.

"Bashful, too bashful, poor lad," croaked Esau, moving so as to partially mask his son, leaning on one cane to release the other, with which he gesticulated unsteadily: "Welcome, gentlemen; more than welcome! Poor house, poorer people, but welcome as air—welcome as air, and—did you speak, sir?" turning toward Bummer Billy and almost falling over sideways as his cane slipped under his shifting weight.

"Dry—so mighty dry I can't even whisper a talk fer the life o' me!" lamented the bummer, drawing a ragged sleeve across his lips and gazing wistfully around the one room. "Ef I hed a weenty sniff of a jug, now! Ef I was to jest ketch a drap o' juice which is—an' me comin' so turrible sick into the stomach o' me that I wouldn't say—ef I die this night, pardner, jest sprinkle my pore grave with whisky, fer to take the cuss off."

Arthur Crossley felt forced to laugh, but still stood at the door with bridle in hand, guarding the horse he evidently valued so highly.

Young France started up at this, muttering something about showing him where to put up the beast; but Crooked Esau waved him back while himself hobbling that way, speaking:

"The good nag—the bonny brave steed! I'll show you where to stable him, sir; show you where—pity 'tis so poor a place for so brave a beast; so poor a—will you allow me, sir?"

His tongue seemed afflicted with a touch of the nervousness which shook and shivered his distorted figure, but Crossley, accustomed to these little pecu-

liarities, willingly followed that shambling lead to the rude structure which gave shelter to a patient, long-eared "mountain canary."

The buro was relentlessly turned out of his fairly comfortable quarters for this more aristocratic cousin, and an armful of sweet hay from the mountain-side was placed before him, Esau all the time croaking on, yet asking no questions, showing no curiosity to satisfy which might prove difficult without endangering an important secret.

Having temporarily cared for his beast, Arthur returned with Esau to the cabin, where they found young Nathan bending over a quickened fire with coffee-pot and skillet.

As no questions were asked, so little information was volunteered beyond the evident fact that they had strayed from the direct road to Breakneck, and finding themselves near the shack, ventured to beg shelter for the remainder of the night.

And then, when Crooked Esau produced a little black jug, Bummer Billy seemed lifted to paradise, while his comrades smiled in tune with his joyous cry.

Of them all, Nathan France appeared by far the least at ease, his big black eyes following every movement made by the Touchstone foreman, and more than once seeming to actually appeal to him—for what end?

At length Crossley asked what was wanting, only to be checked by garrulous Esau in defense of his too bashful boy.

The hot meal was fully enjoyed by the wayfarers, and when this was topped off with another chance at the little black jug, Bummer Billy declared that he was ready to "pass over" without longer delay.

"A full meal layin' in 'twixt a snort o' turrible good stuff; what mo' kin a pore devil ax fer in this weary world o' trouble an' strife?"

With true mountain hospitality Crooked Esau gave freely and gladly of his very best, spreading a fairly comfortable lay-out of furs and army blankets on the puncheon floor, all the time mourning the fact that he had no better accommodations to offer.

While this was being done, and almost unnoticed by his friends, Crossley slipped out of the cabin to steal swiftly over to where his good horse was stabled, no doubt to assure himself that all was well with the creature which he prized so highly.

His prolonged absence was not noticed by either the Sport or the bummer for some little time, for a hearty meal, with its dressing of fairly good liquor, had made both sleepy past the common.

But, as they were preparing to "bunk in," the foreman was missed, and as a couple of hearty hails failed to fetch an answer, the men hurried down toward the rude stable, there to make an amazing discovery by the lantern carried in Crooked Esau's hand; the body of Arthur Crossley lying just inside the stable, apparently cold and stiff in death!

CHAPTER V.

THE BUMMER SCENTS A SNAKE TRAIL.

When the old cripple saw that ghastly pale face beneath the yellow rays of the lantern carried by his unsteady hand, he gave a croaking cry of mingled fear and pity, then dropped the light and shrunk back, crying and moaning like one scared half out of his none too plentiful supply of wits.

"Dead! murdered! Oh, the poor boy—the poor, poor lad!"

Hotspur Hal recoiled as well, but not through personal fear, right hand gripping revolver-butt as he flashed a keen glance around in quest of foeman one or many. Then he spoke, sharply, shoving the cripple still further out of his way:

"All eyes open, Billy! This means business, or I'm off my base. Get down to it, old man, and make a record if you can!"

The real or seeming tramp scarcely needed this verbal spur, judging from his actions, for already he was in motion,

guns in hand and eyes peering around in all directions.

Arlington saw that the horse was still inside that rude shelter, but that no enemy could be skulking there, then he bent over the prostrate figure, making a quick yet fairly comprehensive examination.

So far as he could tell, there were no fresh wounds from gun or knife, although fresh blood marked one side of the young foreman's face and he gave neither sign nor stir in response to call or to touch.

Nathan France had come hastily from the cabin when that alarm was given, and now stood near by, his arms supporting the poor old cripple, who seemed wholly unmanned by that ugly discovery.

The Sport gave a little start as he glanced that way, for the young face looked almost like death in its pallor, only relieved by those big black eyes, themselves holding a far from canny expression there under the pale moonlight.

Just then Bummer Billy came around from the stable's rear, and Hotspur Hal called out, sharply:

"What luck, old man? Any sign or show?"

"Nary! An' you, thar? How's he?"

"Looks ugly, for a fact. Not that I find any holes or big leaks, but his head has been pounded until—"

"Not an accident, then?"

"Don't you think it! Slugged, and that regardless, poor fellow!"

Esau now rallied sufficiently to beg them to carry the poor gentleman from stable to house, even offering his own assistance, seemingly forgetful of the fact that, but for those supporting arms he must fall helplessly to earth for lack of the canes his trembling hands had lost hold of.

Billy pushed past into the stable holding up the lantern for a more thorough inspection. Arlington knelt beside the foreman, supporting his bruised head, yet following the tramp's movements with keen curiosity.

"What is it, Bedad? See anything which—eh?"

"Nothing, only—I say!"

"What is it?"

The bummer caught at and held up the long, full-haired tail of the horse, glancing toward his comrade while saying:

"I can't think it cuts any ice, pardner, but—didn't the critter hev a sort o' mud-travel tail onto it, fust-off?"

"The hair knotted, do you mean? Yes. I noticed that, more because of the dry weather than anything else, I reckon."

"Waal, she hain't that-a-way no more; see?"

"What of it? The poor lad was easing his nag up for the night, I reckon, and was caught off his guard my—well, I'd give a pretty penny to know just who and what!"

Shaking his head like one hardly satisfied with this off-hand explanation, Bummer Billy left the horse and turned to master. Between them Crossley was raised from earth and borne back to the mountain shack, and there given a more thorough examination.

Another ugly-looking gash showed upon his scalp, but so far as sensitive finger-tips could tell, no bones had been broken by the heavy blow under which the Touchstone foreman had gone down in unconsciousness that busy night.

Esau lent all possible aid as he rallied from the shock he had received by that gruesome discovery, and between them Crossley was soon restored to his senses, though his sadly scattered wits were slower to respond.

From his disconnected mutterings it seemed evident that the road-agents had something to do with this, his latest misfortune, and while Nathan betrayed no little uneasiness, Esau bustled about like a good-plucked-one, using a rusty Winchester for a cane as he vowed that all the devils in Breakneck region weren't strong enough to carry the shack in their faces.

"Don't let him sing too mighty loud, pardner," Bummer Billy took occasion to whisper in an aside to the Sport from

Hard Luck, pointing his meaning further by a veiled glance toward the crooked one. "Sings a right plert chune fer a cripple, but it's a snake's eye he totes in the head o' him, an' the kid—ugh! Bad medicine, or I'm a liar!"

Doubtless this was nothing more than prudence on his part, but Bummer Billy had his trouble for nothing.

Few men could boast of a stronger nerve than Arthur Crossley under ordinary conditions, but now as he rallied his wits sufficiently far to fairly comprehend the magnitude of his loss, he turned half-frantic and let the whole truth leak out before any one could stop him.

He had been caught wholly off his guard, stricken senseless and robbed of the money which he meant to defend with his very life.

"Gone—all gone!" he groaned huskily, burying his face in his hands and shivering like a leaf in a storm. "Gone—I swore to fetch it safely through! Gone, and now—it means ruin—ruin!"

The two queerly matched pards interchanged glances; both faces betraying no little interest in these painfully broken sentences. And then, as though feeling full confession would prove a relief to an overburdened brain, Hotspur Hal gently coaxed the luckless foreman to tell it all so far as the important points went.

These kindly words and soothing actions produced the desired effect, and gradually Crossley grew more composed, although still ghastly pale and with far from steady nerves.

A mingled groan and curse escaped his lips when Hotspur Hal admitted that they could find neither sign nor trace of the robbers.

"You were gone longer than we thought for, at first," he explained. "If you set up a howl we never caught it, for—"

"I never knew—I never saw nor heard anything until—oh, the infernal devils!" with hands tightly clenched and shaking as they rose above his head with an impotent gesture.

"Nary a glimpse, even?" asked Bummer Billy, his eyes gleaming vividly in that smoky light as he looked and listened.

Crossley shook his head in negative despair.

"No. I went there—why not say it, since all is lost?"

And then, his voice shaking, his sentences broken and not wholly distinct, Crossley spoke of his mission and of his trust, telling how he had left Capsheaf late that afternoon on horseback, with fifteen thousand dollars in large bills under his guardianship.

"I had to get the cash to Breakneck safely, to save fifty times the value, and as the stage had been twice held up when our money was aboard, I thought—oh, curses cover the devils who foiled me thus!"

Bummer Billy whistled softly at the mention of the thousands, while even Hotspur Hal seemed startled by the serious loss thus implied.

"And you lost the money? But—how came those other fellows to miss such a pile, back yonder?"

"Because I hadn't it upon my own person," came the dejected response. "If held up in spite of my doubles, I knew that would be their first thought; to go through my clothes. And so—my horse—"

"You concealed the stuff in or about his saddle-gear, then?"

"Not just that way. I tied it up in his tail, hoping that would fool any rascal who might—and then, coming so near to losing my horse itself, I went down yonder to—to—"

"Take the boodle out, and so got your own nasty medicine," grimly supplied the bummer. "Pity you didn't still hold trust in that odd bank; blame' pity, fer a holy fact!"

"I thought—I didn't know what better to do, after coming so far and having so much—oh, ye devils!"

A mad rush of blood to his battered

head turned him blind and sent him staggering dizzily aside, saved from falling to the floor only by the swift interposition of the Sport from Hard Luck.

"Steady, pardner! You're a long ways from being able to run a thrashing machine, Crossley, and so—steady, can't you, now?"

"I can't—those devils—the money mustn't—help me recover it if ye be anything like white men, then!"

"You bet we jest will ef it's in the wood, boss!" declared Bummer Billy, lending a hand at an impatient nod from his comrade.

"We can't leave you like this, though, pardner, and the sooner you calm down a bit, the quicker we can get outside and skirmish for sign, don't you see?" soothingly averred Hotspur.

Under their friendly ministrations Crossley was soon lying in a fairly comfortable position upon a pile of furs, beginning to realize his own temporary impotence.

As both assured him, 'twould be but a few hours until his wonted strength should return, bringing a clear brain and steady nerve with it, provided he acted like a man of sanity in the meanwhile.

"And you'll look—you'll try to—the money?" he asked, voice choking painfully as he shivered under their care.

He was given the assurance that all should be done within their power, and their earnestness may be measured by the fact that Bummer Billy never once touched jug to lips as he forced a potion of whisky upon the luckless foreman.

Then, unable longer to resist those wistful eyes, Arlington and Bedad left the shack, bustling about in quest of some sign through means of which the mystery enshrouding that assault and robbery might be solved.

Neither man held great hopes of success, yet both did all that lay in their power, quartering the dry ground and searching for a possible clew; all in vain.

Then, once more coming together near the stable, Bummer Billy spoke in guarded tones to his comrade:

"Mebbe I'm a fool, Hotspur, but it's eetchin' into my cabeza that ef we was to s'arch inside yender shack in place o' out hyar, we'd come a blame sight nigher to hittin' off the right scent; yes—so!"

"You mean—what?"

"That thar's somethin' gone sp'iled in Denmark, not to say rotten!"

"What? Surely you can't think that—not the cripple, Billy?"

"Waal, pardner, mebbe I'm a plum fool, an' mebbe I hain't so turrible fur off my base, nuther. An' thar's cripples, an' cripples!"

The Hard Luck Sport gave a little start at that thinly veiled hint, moving closer to gaze keenly into that hairy face before speaking in his turn:

"Come off, Billy! Surely you can't think Crooked Esau a fraud?"

A brief pause, a shoulder-shrug, then the bummer made answer:

"Waal, pardner, mebbe no, an' mebbe yes. Aryhow, I'd jest like fer to be hid in a snug corner nigh-side him in a sure-nough snooze, then hev a he'ole 'larm o' fire rung right into them ears o' his'n!"

"And you really think that—"

"Jest to see ef he didn't shake foot 'thout ary cane or crutch or the likes o' them! An' then—whist!"

For Esau came crab-like around the shack, to eagerly hail the partners as to their success.

"Any signs, gentlemen; have you found any signs, pray?"

"You bet ye! Signs o' the devil an' a passel o' his nasty imps," gruffly retorted Bummer Billy, as he slouched toward the cabin entrance, abandoning the search as useless for the present.

Hotspur followed, lending a friendly hand to the cripple, who seemed more than ever to require artificial support after so much and such unusual excitement.

Bearing that hint in mind, Arlington tried his best to detect any imposture but failed, as he firmly believed, because

of imposture there was none about Crooked Esau.

It was a far from pleasant task which now confronted the pards, for Arthur Crossley raised up from his rude pallet, face full of intense eagerness, still fighting for hope against deepest despair.

"You have found something? The money is not—don't say it's wholly lost, gentlemen?" he panted, shivering through intense emotion.

"Maybe we'll have better luck when daylight comes," spoke the Hard Luck Sport in turn, trying to soften the blow as much as possible.

But Crossley had rallied sufficiently to recognize the truth, and this dashed his last hope to earth.

A groan passed his lips. His head sunk and his face was buried in palms, his athletic frame shaken by powerful emotion. Then he spoke:

"I know what you mean. I felt it, but—oh, curse them all! Why didn't they kill me outright while robbing me of my sacred trust?"

CHAPTER VI.

A MODERN BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

The next day dawned clear and beautiful over Breakneck, a typical silver camp, but one rather more reputable than those of earlier days.

Still, there were occasions when Breakneck could "go the pace" with any other camp on record, and possibly was all the more dangerous from having for so long followed the smooth path of good repute.

Just at the present nothing could appear calmer, more quiet, or peaceful than this same silver center; yet, nevertheless, under the surface a nasty row was brooding, and the prospects were far more for war than for peace.

None knew this better than pretty Phyllis Dikeman, sole child and heiress to the wealth of which Roger Dikeman, owner of the Touchstone Mine and other properties only less valuable, could boast; yet she was smiling brightly while leaving house and tripping down that winding path which led to the bridge over the brawling river.

The Dikeman residence lay quite a little ways outside of the town proper, although considered part and parcel of that to-be metropolis.

The river ran between, then cut through a corner of the town itself, but communication was made easy enough by a footbridge in addition to the road-bridge lower down, across which the stage-route naturally led.

Without a thought of near trouble, her face bright with smiles, even as her heart was light from pure joy, the pretty maiden tripped on, a low lit upon her red lips.

At this early hour there was little fear of meeting unwelcome parties; too late for the laboring class who found employment in the mines or their adjuncts, too early for the riff-raff with which every town of the like is more or less cursed.

Still, all joy and innocence herself, Phyllis would hardly have given thought to a possible misadventure, no matter what the time or the place.

In spite of the awkward happenings which had of late days so seriously undermined the happy influence of her father, Phyllis was a general favorite throughout Breakneck, and never yet had she met with frown or hard word or insult since her first coming to town from school.

A turn in that path carried the maiden out of sight of her home a short time before the footbridge was reached, but she had no fears, and passing out to near the center of that span, paused to lean arms upon the railing and to gaze down upon the foam-flecked waters beneath.

The stream had eaten for itself a considerable channel in the ages gone by, for here the banks were more than a score feet above the water-level.

Just there the stream flowed smoothly,

for the water was deep, although but a few rods higher up great boulders broke the surface and sent little lumps of foam to lighten the expanse below.

For several minutes Phyllis stood motionless with bright eyes fixed upon the flowing waters, where an occasional fish turned up a silvery side in play or a dash for food.

It was more habit than aught else, this lingering upon the foot-bridge, for here was a favorite resort of the maiden. At other times she found amusement in watching the active life below, but not now, for something higher and prouder than piscatory life brought flush to cheek and smile to lips; something more than the reflection of her own fair face in the waters below brought the love-light to her great eyes of heavenly blue, just then.

A name passed her lips almost unconsciously, and startled by her own voice, Phyllis drew back from the railing to flash a nervously abashed glance around on all sides.

Unfortunately, perhaps, the maiden was too deeply confused to search closely, else she might have escaped the encounter which a perverse fate had fixed for that bright morning.

Ugly eyes had been watching the girl ever since her light steps first touched that crossing, and now an ugly face broadened a bit with a still uglier grin as Phyllis resumed her journey, drawing nearer the Breakneck end of that bridge, where a few great rocks were partly masked by vines and scrubby bushes.

Right there an evil-eyed knave was lying in ambush, and not until the daughter of Roger Dikeman was within a half-dozen yards of his hiding-place did the fellow spring up to view, giving the maiden quite a start by the suddenness of his appearance.

"What ye skeered at, pritty?" he coarsely cried, coming forward with a lurch, hands resting upon the guard-rail as though their owner felt the need of some such support.

At first glance he seemed well under the influence of strong drink, and as she caught this impression, Phyllis half-turned, as though to beat a retreat; but she was proud and high-spirited, in spite of her loving disposition, and that coarse sneer caused her to pause, even as it brought a hot flush to her smooth cheeks.

"I am not scared; why should I be?" she retorted, just a bit sharply.

The fellow gave another forward lurch, this time effectually barring the way, and winning the advantage he was playing for from the start.

Phyllis was too proud to turn in flight without more serious cause than she saw so far, and thanks to this the knave won close enough to be within reach through a long bound, should he see fit to make such.

"Mebbe I hain't jest the sort o' comp'ny ye lotted on findin' down hyar, Miss Dikeman. Mebbe I hain't nigh so pritty, nur so neat, nur so smart, nur so sweet-scented all over, but—eh?"

"Will you kindly stand aside, sir?" coldly interrupted the maiden, nodding head and waving hand imperiously. "I am on my way to town, and this is neither time no place for—Stand aside, sir!"

"Then ye don't know me, pritty? Ye cain't see what Stiddy, thar! I never did like fer to be scowdged, even by a pritty gal which was—an' you be all-over pritty, too!"

"Sir!"

"Augh! now, honey-dove o' dewy delight!" chuckled the brute, as he almost imperceptibly edged a trifle closer his intended prey, at the same time flashing a swift glance over one shoulder as if to make sure there was no immediate prospect of intrusion from that quarter. "Ef you was to once git to know me, now—"

"I do know you, sir," sharply interrupted Phyllis, with a frown as she

stepped back a couple of paces, yet still facing the foe.

"Is that so? An' how much mought ye know of me, now?"

"You are the—the person who called at our house, to see my father, the other day."

"Your pap, hey? An' he is—jest who mought that same pap be, my bunch of everlastin' delight, now?"

"Mr. Dikeman, if you have any business with him—"

"Augh-yaugh!" with a savage snarl and vicious showing of tobacco-stained teeth, as his dirty hands closed and made a passionate gesture. "Business, is it? With Roger Dikeman? You jest bet I hev, then!"

"You know where to look for my father, sir, and now—again I ask you to stand aside and permit me to pass on my way," proudly spoke the mine-owner's daughter, eyes glowing and cheeks flushed with indignation.

Phyllis stepped forward like one able to enforce her commands, but with a quick movement the ruffian caught both of her wrists, laughing coarsely as she gave a faint cry and struggled to break loose.

"Stiddy, ye blame' little fool, ye!" he cried, with another ugly show of teeth, as he held her helpless. "I haint gwine fer to do ye no hurt. 'Tain't you I'm out gunnin' fer, this lay. But—Waal, reckon I kin tell ole Dikeman's gal what's comin' fer ole Dikeman himself. Eh?"

"You cowardly brute!"

"What? Spit-cat, eh? Ef I didn't—Durned ef I hain't a good mind fer to take—Brute, is it?"

"Let me go—How dare you hold—Release me, I say, you coward!" panted the maiden, struggling with all her poor might to break away from that loathsome clutch; but instead of succeeding, she felt the rascal shift one hand so as to clasp her waist with a strong arm, his other hand rising with hers in grasp to press against her bosom, and so force her head backward and face uppermost in spite of her struggles.

"Augh-yaugh! Ugly words, is it? Wall, words kin go fer a lick, an' don't the Good Book tell us to pay back kiss fer a blow? So—oh, be aisy, now! I'll kiss ye ef it takes the peel off, jest fer good luck!"

Phyllis felt like one crushed in the grip of a giant, and she could scarcely cry aloud, struggle as she might; but faint though that appeal for rescue was, it seemed to reach the right ears, since a tall form came swiftly forward, striking the footbridge before giving shout or cry.

The jar of that leap served to warn the ruffian of danger, for he turned half-way around with a snarling curse upon his lips, even before he could have recognized the newcomer.

"Drop that, you whelp!" fairly thundered the rescuer, as one hand shot out to catch the shrinking maiden, its mate drawing back for a sure stroke from the shoulder.

The ruffian released Phyllis to defend himself, and ducked far enough to escape that initial stroke; but then, as the maiden retreated a pace or two, leaving a fairly clear arena for the two men, the collision came in a hurry.

Another curse, another blow, then the rascal went down heavily from a neat left-hander, jarring the whole bridge in his fall, then lying in a shivering heap for the time being.

"Lie down, you cur!" fiercely cried the rescuer. Then, as his enemy made no sign of rallying, he turned toward the maiden, smile chasing away frown, and tones growing actually musical as he spoke, with hand tipping his stylish hat.

But poor Phyllis, frightened far worse than she had thought possible under any circumstances, reeled and gasped, one hand rising to cover her painfully fluttering heart, all objects darkening and

dancing strangely before her dimmed vision.

With a swift leap the man caught her in his arms, and as though that mere contact set his own blood on fire, that support turned to a passionate embrace, and the kiss which had been spoken of by the ragged ruffian was taken by this well-dressed gentleman.

"My love—oh, my precious darling!" he cried, huskily, yet with an earnestness which could never be feigned.

Tighter yet grew his embrace. Closer yet the maiden was drawn to his breast. And again those neatly-mustached lips sought to sip the unconscious honey from her partly-opened mouth. But, no! With an energy which seemed miraculous, under the circumstances, Phyllis drew her face away, and at the same time twisted out of that almost fierce clasp, giving a little cry which was hardly articulate as her feet again touched the planks of that footway.

"You are not—I feared that rascal had seriously injured you, my dear—my love!" huskily murmured the man, eyes glowing and face warmly flushing with a passion which he needed not to feign even in part.

"No—he never—I don't—" stammered Phyllis, almost unconsciously brushing a hand swiftly across the lips his kiss had fallen upon, as though there might be pollution in the touch.

"If I thought he had, I'd murder the ugly brute by inches! I'd—Are you so certain then, miss—my darling?"

Like one unable to smother his fiery passion even in part, he again caught the maiden in his arms, holding her with almost brutal power, while again seeking her lips with his.

Even as success seemed his, failure came. Phyllis deftly slipped a little hand over her own lips, pushing him back with her other hand, crying out as she did this.

"No, no! You must not—you shall not, Mr. Eden! I never—I am not one to be—Release me, sir!"

His face turned pale in an instant, but his eyes glittered even more vividly than before, while there came a brief show of white teeth in tight lock as his full lips parted in half-smile, half-sneer.

"You are one to be loved, worshipped, adored, Phyllis Dikeman! And I am your slave, your doormat, if you see fit to wipe those dainty feet upon my poor person! Can I say more than that, Phyllis?"

"You can say less—far less than that, Mr. Eden," with forced composure, as she smoothed her ruffled garments and drew a little away from the tall man, whom Breakneck knew as its most daring, audacious, successful gambler and sport in general.

"If I say aught, it must be the truth, Miss Dikeman," declared the gambler, with a half-mocking bow. "And that truth is—"

"Far from agreeable to my ears, sir, though as a gentleman you ought not oblige me to speak so plainly," cried Phyllis, with a swift gesture.

She half turned as though to retrace her steps, yet even now her proud nature kept her from actually taking to flight, disagreeable though all this certainly was to her.

"Would it have been better for me to have held back and allowed yonder cur to work his evil will upon you, Miss Dikeman," asked Saul Eden, with almost brutal distinctness. "Surely I merit more thanks than reproach for all this, little lady?"

"My heartfelt thanks are certainly yows, Mr. Eden; but when you presume further, and—"

"Is it presumption to love one so wholly loveable, then?"

Instead of replying, Phyllis gave a quick cry and a start as of terror; then cried out in sharp accents, while hand lifted to point to a spot behind the gambler.

"Look! He means—he'll shoot you, sir!"

For the burly ruffian who had gone down so heavily before that deftly planted stroke of fist, had rallied sufficiently far to scramble to his feet, and now was cocking a revolver as his hand rose for a shot!

CHAPTER VII.

HOW ROUGH HOUSE TOOK WATER.

One especially quick on trigger, or even fairly expert with a gun, would have drilled the sport before he could turn at that alarm; but this rough-clad and rougher-tongued knave seemed clumsy past the ordinary, or else had not yet fairly recovered from his downfall.

Saul Eden wheeled swiftly to sight both man and gun, giving a sharp cry as he half-crouched for a leap upon his enemy.

"You, Rough House?"

"Yes, an' I'll blow ye clean to—so!"

The waste of barely a brace of seconds for an answer, yet that was enough to make all the difference between success and failure, victory and defeat.

As he saw the revolver swinging upward with a motion which surely meant shooting to kill, Saul Eden gave a curious twist and squirm as though to confuse an aim, at the same time springing forward to close.

The weapon barked viciously, but its lead sped harmlessly by, leaving the gambler untouched and doubly dangerous, since now he had a fair excuse for summary work.

"I'll kill you like—"

"You drunken brute! Drop that gun, or— Drop it, I say!"

With the words Eden closed in, clutching the armed hand and forcing the weapon out of line even as Rough House strove to lift hammer for another and surer shot.

A blow, a kick, a snarling oath, then the two men were locked together in a desperate grapple, bending and swaying, panting hotly as one strove to shoot, the other striving to disarm.

Both men were powerful, and each was accustomed to hold his end level in a fight, no matter where or how that row should start; but just now the gambler appeared to be in better trim for such a contest, and little by little the tide turned his way.

"Drop it, you cur!" Eden repeated, sternly, forcing that armed right hand upward and backward, keeping his adversary from firing another shot the while. "Drop it, or—now!"

Breast to breast the two men were, writhing and twisting, fighting with legs and feet as with hands and arms, but now a sudden wrench and twist caused Rough House to give a cry of savage pain and fury, then the weapon in dispute went flying out of his slackened grip, to whirl over and over ere it struck the flowing waters beneath the footbridge.

Like one fascinated, Phyllis Dikeman witnessed this swift, close and stern grapple, shrinking back a bit as the two men struggled so desperately for the mastery, yet held from flight by some strange charm.

And now she saw victory coming to the right—saw the whisky-enflamed ruffian falter and almost collapse before that fierce strain; heard him cry out in savage despair, even as the Breakneck Sport pressed his advantage to the utmost.

Saul Eden put forth his greatest efforts as he felt Rough House giving way, breaking the grip of those dirty paws and twisting the rascal nearly off his feet as he swung him partly around.

Forced against the railing of the footbridge, his strength seemed to fail all of a sudden, and with hardly a struggle on his part, Rough House was lifted off the floor and rolled over the rail, held by those strong arms for a moment before being let drop through space.

A single wild yell which sent a chill

through the maiden, and seemed to fairly curdle her blood, then Rough House struck the water, to sink and vanish from sight amid a shower of spray.

Phyllis cried out in terror, and without so much as a single glance after his defeated adversary, Saul Eden sprung her way, those same powerful arms lending her fresh support as her limbs seemed falling her.

"There, there, darling!" he said, soothingly, with another warm glow replacing that battle-light in his dark eyes. "I had to do it—just had to! Not for myself; I don't count; but the rascal meant shooting, and was just drunk enough to scatter lead regardless. You might—I just couldn't let you run any further risk, dear Phyllis!"

The Breakneck Sport seemed remarkably agitated for a man of his recognized nerve, but surely, the excuse he thus gave was sufficient?

With a barely articulate cry the maiden broke away from his insecure grasp, swiftly retreating the way she had come but a few minutes earlier, followed quickly by the gambler, who, just then, appeared to have no other thought or care than to press his suit in that quarter.

He paid no further attention to his defeated antagonist, nor even looked over shoulder when sundry shouts and yells came from the direction of the town, although they certainly must have reached his ears.

That pistol-shot attracted attention, and at least half a dozen citizens witnessed the greater portion of that struggle above the water from a distance, and even before Rough House took that downward plunge, they were rushing toward the scene of action, giving shouts and yells which rapidly spread the alarm further.

Possibly that coming rush may have added to the maiden's fears and quickened her flight, but Saul Eden seemed proof against all that. He followed even more swiftly, only once losing a few yards, when a couple of men came running from that side, eagerly demanding what the racket was all about.

"Rough House," was the Sport's curt response, barely slackening his pace for a couple of seconds to fling forth the words. "He insulted Miss Dikeman, and then tried to plug me. I dumped him into the drink and— Look to the fool if you like!"

His left hand struck down the arm which would have stayed his progress, then Saul Eden rushed on, to shortly afterward overtake the young woman, who now showed signs of failing, more through excitement than overexertion, however.

"It's all right. There's nothing more to be afraid of, dear Phyllis. That rascal only— Poor child!" as he strove to clasp her waist like one who feels support is sorely needed.

But again he was foiled, the girl twisting sharply aside, and even, striking his hand with hers as a warm flush came to her pale cheeks.

"Don't, sir! You must not—"

Only a fool or a blind man could have mistaken her meaning, now, and his own face flushed hotly, for Saul Eden was neither the one nor the other. But instead of recoiling, he persisted, knowing as he did that 'twould be hard to make a bad matter worse.

"I will—I must, Phyllis, darling!" he cried, in earnest tones, with quick movement, catching her hands in his and checking her attempted flight once more. "It may seem ungenerous, so soon after risking my life in your defense, darling, but I love you so madly, and so—"

"No, no!" cried the maiden, cutting short his speech, more by her determined effort to free hands than by words alone. "You must not use such words to me, Mr. Eden. I cannot listen, even—"

"Rather than see yonder brute touch you, Phyllis, I would have died," the gambler passionately persisted, still

holding her hands between his own and drawing her a little closer to his broad breast. "He meant to murder me! Don't make me sorry that I fouled the knave! Don't make me wish death had been my sole reward for saving you from insult—or even worse, my precious!"

Phyllis ceased her struggles at this passionate appeal, face turning very pale and grave as her big blue eyes bravely met those glowing orbs of jet. A moment's silence, then the maiden spoke:

"I am truly grateful for the service you rendered me, Mr. Eden, but you must never again speak to me in such terms—never again, sir!"

"I love you—I love you!" he cried, voice almost harsh from the intensity of his passion. "Never more, you say, Phyllis? Ah, my love! You are cruel—too cruel! I love you as no man ever loved fair woman before! I love you—I worship you! My love is my life, and both are for you—ever and always for you, my angel of light and of love!"

"No, no! You shall not—you must not!"

"I shall—I must, Phyllis! I love you so madly that— Look ye, girl!" his tones changing and his face altering until he seemed more nearly demon than man. "With your love to bank on, I'll be white as the day is long, and honest as your own pure soul. Without—don't make me say it, darling! And yet—yes! If you throw me over now, it'll turn me to the bad; it'll make me a very devil!"

Phyllis shrunk as far away as those strong hands would permit, her face pale from strong emotion, but her soul brave and undaunted as ever.

Blue eyes met black for a moment; then the girl said, gravely:

"I am sorry, Mr. Eden, but—it's no use! I do not—I never can return such love as you now express, and—"

"Don't say that, Phyllis; don't tell me there's no hope!"

"I must, for it is only the truth. I don't love you as—I never can love you, Mr. Eden," bravely persisted the maiden, then freeing her hands by a sudden effort and moving on in the direction of her home, now within fair sight and at no great distance.

With a swift leap the Breakneck Sport was beside her once more. He made no effort to recover his grasp, but spoke in stern, even harsh and menacing accents:

"Think well before you say the likes o' that, Miss Dikeman. If not for my sake, for your own—ay! for the sake of your doting father, my proud and naughty girl! Think of him before you crowd me across the safety-line, Phyllis!"

Instead of replying the maiden hurried on still faster. Eden kept near, speaking further in those ominous tones.

"You'll sup sorrow with a long spoon, girl, if you force me to— Why, Phyllis, can't you even begin to see? I can save your father from heavy loss, if nothing worse. I can hold him up in spite of his tottering credit, or I can throw him down into the dirt and mire— Ay, more—I can turn his fine clothes to ugly rags and—"

"Coward! Liar!"

Almost mercely came these epithets from the maiden's lips, and then Phyllis fled on in haste, leaving the gambler standing in his tracks like one half-stunned by a vicious slap full in the face.

So he stood and watched until he saw Phyllis reach her home and pass within, only drawing a long, full breath when he caught the faint echo of that emphatic slam.

Slightly dulled by the distance, Saul Eden caught cries and shouts which rose at or near the footbridge, and his mustached lip curled a bit as he flung a look toward the spot where he had caused Rough House to literally "take water."

"Was it worth while?" he mused, half savagely, as thumb and finger twisted

imperial up to his sharp and gnawing teeth. "Couldn't I have used that drunken fool to better advantage? If old Dikeman—when the girl tells him—"

Those glittering black eyes turned again toward the house within which Phyllis had so recently vanished, and after a barely perceptible hesitation the gambler gave a decisive nod of head, then strode forward with the air of a man whose mind is definitely shaped at last.

"I'll do it, and do it right now!" he vowed, resolutely.

It took but a few moments for those long and shapely legs to cover those few rods of space, and there was a grim smile upon the gambler's face as he paused upon the low, broad step, hand lifting to sound a summons upon one of those painted panels.

But before his knuckles could come fairly into play, the barrier swung wide, and a tall, well-dressed, stern-faced old man stood in the opening, his voice coming sharp and distinct the next instant:

"What evil have you been up to now, Saul Eden? What have you been trying to do to my girl?"

"Why, my dear Mr. Dikeman, how can you talk so?" fairly purred the Breakneck Sport, showing teeth in a bland smile the while.

"I can do more than talk, Saul Eden, as you may discover, if you dare venture too far. I am an old man, and far from being what I once was, but if you dare harm my girl I'll kill you as I might a mad dog!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SAUL EDEN SEEKS A REWARD.

Sternly, almost fiercely, came these words, but so far from flinching or showing signs of dismay, the Breakneck Sport smiled and bowed afresh, laughing softly and briefly before making reply.

"Why, my dear sir, instead of injuring your daughter or being your personal enemy, my proudest aim in life is to make you my happy father-in-law!"

Never human dove cooed more sweetly than this, but that supreme insolence (which he alone could fully appreciate) stung the mine-owner to the quick, and with a low, fierce cry he clenched fist and struck full at that mocking face with all the power of his still good right arm.

Had the blow taken full effect, Saul Eden must have measured his length right then and there, but it was not so to be.

With the deft ease of one who held all the arts of the "squared circle," Eden jerked his head to one side, laughing as he caught that wrist and brought his full powers into play.

In spite of his age and gray hairs, Roger Dikeman was still a powerful man, yet now he found himself little better than a child in the grasp of his present adversary.

With apparent ease Saul Eden forced the mine-owner back over his own threshold, following after and kicking the door shut with easy skill, performing it all so neatly that, even if many eyes had been watching their actions, very few would have been keen enough to read the whole truth, or to see more than an unusually cordial greeting and friendly entrance.

"Now, don't you play the fool all over, Roger Dikeman," sternly spoke the Breakneck Sport, as he won admission after this fashion. "Why not take it gracefully, and play—"

"If this is a jest, sir—" began the indignant proprietor, only to have his unwelcome visitor cut in with cool words:

"About your becoming my honored father by course of law? Devil a joke, then, but solid earnest on my part, I assure you, Mr. Dikeman!"

The mine-owner flushed angrily at this, but controlling himself by a strong effort of will, he spoke in turn:

"Then, sir, drop it; drop it now and forever!"

"But, my dear man—"

"Drop it, I say, and never dare to insult me or mine in such manner again," sternly menaced the old man, and he reached forth a hand to turn knob and fling wide the door for the gambler's immediate departure.

But that was not in accordance with Saul Eden's game. With a light laugh he nodded dissent, coolly passing on and opening the door which all Breakneck knew led into the private, or home office of the mining magnate.

"Whenever you're ready, I am, Mr. Dikeman," he said, showing white teeth in a smile as he paused for an instant upon that threshold, then stepped within the room with delicious nerve and coolness.

For a brief space the proprietor hesitated, hand on knob. Then he yielded so far as to turn and follow his insolent visitor to that other portal, frowning blackly as he looked within.

The gambler of Breakneck had already seated himself upon the easiest chair he could find, and was just touching lighted match to cigar as the mine-owner came to the door. Nodding easily he spoke again:

"No objection to the smoke, I trust, sir? Thanks! Come in, please. Don't stand on ceremony, I beg. Why should you, when I am not?"

"You infernal scoundrel!"

"Better knave than idiot, and the last is just what you are trying to brand yourself, Roger Dikeman," coolly retorted the gambler, yet with a change of tone which helped warn the mine-owner not to go too far.

"How dare you, sir? What do you mean by— What do you mean, I say?"

"Business in a minute, Mr. Dikeman, if you'll only bridle that far from ruly tongue of yours long enough to give me half a chance. Come in and sit down, or—would you rather have Miss Phyllis as a witness to our little confab, then?"

That pale, gaunt visage flushed hotly for a moment, paling again as he looked into those curiously glittering eyes before him. Roger Dikeman was far from being a coward, and he would far rather have answered by blow or kick than by yielding. Still—yield he did, so far as stepping inside the room and dropping into a chair was concerned.

With easy grace the gambler crossed over to close the door, and if there had been a key in the lock doubtless he would have turned that in addition, for he pressed the top catch home, laughing softly as Dikeman gave start and frown at the sound.

"For your sake more than my own, dear sir," he assured, returning to his chosen position, to add: "Now, sir, right here you have it. I come with an olive-branch in one hand, a bared blade in the other. What is your preference—peace, or war to the knife?"

"I hardly— Just what do you mean, sir?"

"Business, up to the throat," came the brisk response. "You're in a nasty row with the miners, particularly of the Touchstone—"

"And who is most to blame for that part of it all, you villain?" passionately cried the mine-owner, hands clenching and face flushing with angry conviction.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I had a finger in your pie, sir?"

"I believe it—on my very soul I believe you are at the bottom of the whole trouble!"

"Thanks for the compliment, but I must decline to accept that honor, my dear sir," smoothly declared the Breakneck Sport, smiling afresh. "I am free to admit that I've taken a certain interest in the matter, for reasons which I'll explain a bit further along. For, now: listen, please!"

"I repeat: you are in an ugly box, just now. You have sore trouble with both mines and men, but especially with the

Touchstone workings. Am I not right, dear sir?"

Saul Eden paused as though for an answer, but instead of putting that into words, Roger Dikeman let his head droop and gave an involuntary sigh which spoke even more plainly.

"All right, and you needn't admit what we are both fully convinced of," easily spoke the gambler, with a brief nod of approval. "The situation looks mighty nigh as bad as it well can appear, yet—I can make it ten-fold worse, or I can smooth it all over again, just whichever you see fit to elect, Mr. Dikeman!"

The mine-owner gave a slight start, his briefly dulled eyes brightening again as he lifted head to gaze squarely into that handsome face before him.

A brief pause, and again he spoke:

"How do you mean? What do you mean, rather?"

"Wait a bit, please. So far as this Touchstone mine is concerned, Mr. Dikeman, you merely hold the property on sufferance—"

"A lie—you know you lie!"

"The naked truth, Mr. Dikeman," coolly asseverated the Breakneck Sport, waving a white hand as though brushing aside that rude speech. "You have no papers to prove your claims to the ownership, and the records have been destroyed by fire."

"But I did have papers, sir!" passionately cried the old man. "I had the title deeds and a receipt in full. I had the claim legally recorded, and only for—"

"Exactly," came the cool interruption. "Any man under the same or similar circumstances would naturally make just such an assertion, of course."

"Sir! Do you mean to insinuate that I would lie about it?"

"Well, the Touchstone is valuable enough to justify almost any means or method, my dear sir. And, unfortunately, how can you prove what you now claim is gospel truth?"

Instead of replying, that gray head was once more bowed, and again a hollow groan was wrung from those quivering lips.

Saul Eden smiled maliciously, plainly enjoying this suffering, yet ready to don a mask should those eyes be lifted again. While meaning to torture, he was not yet ready to drive this man to utter rebellion.

"As I put it at first, Mr. Dikeman, you are in an ugly box so far as the Touchstone property is concerned. Leaving the labor difficulties out of the question for the moment, there is the other horn of the dilemma: Another fellow does hold title deeds to that identical property, and stands ready to make legal oath that you never paid him for the claim save in empty promises."

"A lie! An infernal liar—and you know it, Saul Eden!"

"Oh, no, my dear sir; lie or gospel, I'll never swear to one or the other. In fact, I don't know anything at all about it, save—later on."

"It's a fact, though, that a prior claim has been brought to light, and the outcome must be left to time, the decision to law and the law-sharps. Unless—will you listen to a bit of sober reason, Mr. Dikeman?"

The gambler spoke with abrupt change of voice and manner, and the mine-owner lifted head in wakening curiosity.

He believed this man to be one of his most unscrupulous enemies, yet he could not afford to throw away a single chance where the odds had turned so heavily against him of recent days.

"What is it you want, Saul Eden?"

"To make a square deal with you, for one thing, if you will only come to meet me half-way. Will you do that much?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've got the man, and that man has got the title deeds to the Touchstone property, which is—"

"They are forgeries!"

"So you say, but who's to prove them such? I claim to be a pretty fair judge of such trifles, and I'm free to say this

much: If it has to come to that, those papers will stand good in any law court, and you will just as surely be cast in damages. Do you fairly comprehend what that all means, Mr. Dikeman?"

"I'll fight it to the bitter end! I'll never yield to such foul blackmailing as—oh, you infernal scoundrel!"

"Hard words break no bones," philosophically quoted the gambler, his lip curling with unmasked scorn. "Even while the vow is hot upon your lips, you know that the game is lost to you even before the first card touches the table. And so—play white, old gentleman!"

"If that man holds the deeds, I grip the fellow, and he'll squeal or button up exactly as I bid. I can make you or break you, and so—here you have it, sugar-coated to suit almost any sensitive taste!"

"Pay me my price, Roger Dikeman, and I will silence Rough House and turn those papers over to you, to preserve or to destroy, just as you may deem wisest."

"Right here you have it, sir. Can any man speak fairer?"

Saul Eden wore a bland smile, his white teeth showing a trifle as he leaned forward in his chair, elbows on knees, fingers interlocked and thumbs smoothly twiddling.

Roger Dikeman slowly flushed before those keen black eyes, but if he felt the powerful temptation thus deftly put in shape, he made no haste to accept the offer, speaking slowly:

"Go on. You haven't finished yet."

"Nor can I, until you accept my offer, sir. And—you do accept it, of course?"

This with fair assumption, yet underneath lay a degree of uneasiness which could not be entirely masked.

"Go on," repeated Dikeman, huskily. "That price is—what?"

"Only a few minutes ago I saved your daughter from coarse insult if not from fouler injury, Roger Dikeman," swiftly spoke the gambler, now thoroughly in earnest. "I love her; give me Phyllis for a wife, and—"

Mr. Dikeman sprang to his feet with an angry ejaculation at this audacious demand, but ere he could find words to express those feelings, a loud alarm broke forth in front of his residence.

CHAPTER IX.

THERE IS MUSIC IN THE AIR.

Although the room was entered from the hallway, two of its windows looked toward the south, in which direction Breakneck lay.

As an evidence of luxurious comfort, Roger Dikeman had provided his place with outer blinds, and now, though these were closed, sounds came distinctly through the raised windows from the front.

Ugly sounds, too, for a man who knew himself in evil odor with the laboring portion of Breakneck, against whose life more than one dark threat had been hurled of recent days.

In spite of his granted nerve, the mine owner turned a goodly bit paler as he instinctively turned toward the light, for his first thought was that the miners had come to demand blood if gold was longer lacking.

Saul Eden betrayed far less agitation, although he had a clearer conception of the situation, and there was a silent laugh upon his lips as he turned partway in his chair, crossing legs with careless grace.

"Nasty bit of impudence, isn't it?" he drawled, elbow on chair-back as long fingers smoothed his jetty mustache. "Sorry, sir, 'pon honor, but I never told 'em to tune up—like this!"

For just then words and even sentences became audible, and Roger Dikeman, half bewildered, turned face toward the gambler, exclaiming:

"Why, it's—they mean you?"

"Well, it does sound that way, for a fact."

But the mine owner was not listening. He sprang across the room to one of the windows, canting the shutters to see more clearly, catching his breath sharply as

he both saw and heard; saw a round score of rough-looking fellows there in front, with others hurrying up, heard calls for Saul Eden to show himself under penalty.

"Come out o' thar, or we'll done fetch ye!"

"He done it! I seed him with my own eyes!"

"It's bloody murder; no less! Yank him out o' thar ef he don't come a-boomin', lads!"

Roger Dikeman could see that fully one-half of the crowd wore wet and draggled garments, much as though they had just come out of the river, while nearly all of them were brandishing or making a show of deadly weapons, while yelling after the Breakneck Sport.

While he must have felt not a little relief on his own account, after the natural dread which had first inspired him, Roger Dikeman was puzzled and confused, turning toward his unwelcome guest to mutter:

"I don't—why do they talk so fierce? Surely you have not—"

"What I've done was in defense of your innocent daughter, Mr. Dikeman," quickly vowed the gambler, as he rose erect and moved nearer the shuttered window to glance forth. "Keep that in mind, will you? And if you back me up as one white man should another, I'll bluff those howling devils down, even yet!"

He took time for but a single glance through the slats, like one counting the chances for and against himself, then hurried out of that room to the front entrance, flinging wide the door and boldly facing the disorderly crowd as its members fairly howled at his appearance.

With his tall, athletic figure drawn to its greatest height, one hand resting lightly on a hip, while its mate was flung upward, commandingly, Saul Eden confronted those who were howling for his life-blood for a few seconds in proud silence.

"Button lips, all who claim to be white men!" was his crisp salutation a single breath later.

Almost instant silence followed, and after running those keen black eyes over the assembly, the Sport of Breakneck spoke again:

"What's the matter with you, anyway, boys? From the way you came howling one might fancy 'twas a whirly-gust of wolves on a bender!"

"Whar's Rough House, durn ye?" cried one of their number, pushing more to the front, shaking a by no means too clean fist in that direction, while adding: "I see ye bloody murder him, an'—"

"That's a lie, John Whiffler, and you know it!" sternly cried Saul Eden, that seemingly careless hand flying up with a revolver at cock and covering yonder burly fellow. "Rough House was living when I dumped him into the drink, and if that killed him—blame his lack of cleanliness, not me!"

"Thar was—didn't ye shoot him fust?"

"I did not. The only powder burned came from his end of the circus, while I was seeking to defend a lady from insult. If that is a crime for lynching, gentlemen, make the most of it."

John Whiffler fell back, confused by this blunt denial, and with the air of one who feels he can take the chances. Saul Eden lowered his weapon, muzzle turned to the rear as the back of his hand once more rested lightly against one hip.

There was a half smile, half sneer, upon his face just then. Black eyes had caught a glint of red, and quietly though he stood, the Breakneck Sport looked the very personification of nerve and willingness to fight.

A brief pause, then the gambler spoke again:

"That's a weenty bit more like it, gentlemen. When a gang comes at me with a whoop and a howl, champing tushes and pawing dirt all at the same time, it stirs my ebenezer heap right

more than it wakens my cowardice, for—"

"Nobody never called ye coward, Eden!"

"Well, the same man never did it twice, to my face," retorted the Sport, with a brief laugh. "But, as I started to say, now that you are playing just a bit more decent, what's all this racket at anyway?"

"Waal, thar was Rough House, ye see, boss," hesitatingly said John Whiffler, shifting uneasily from one foot to its mate.

"We done hunted fer the pore critter, then, but we didn't find hide nur ha'r of him; jest so!"

"In the river, do you mean?"

"Sure! Didn't you dump him over the bridge?"

"You look as though you had been trying for a bath in a hurry," with a smiling glance over those wet forms. "And you failed to find what you were hunting for?"

"Jest that! Nur he never come out on dry land, nuther. Ef he hed, some o' us'd 'a' seed him, shore! Then, too, thar'd 'a' bin sign o' sech," hurriedly spluttered the big fellow, as though himself on trial instead of being a self-appointed judge, jury, and executioner, rolled in one.

Saul Eden listened placidly, mustache curling as red lip quivered beneath its shadow. He appeared to be wholly at ease in spite of the vast odds arrayed against him.

Little by little the first crowd was added to, fresh numbers coming upon the scene as the word spread throughout Breakneck of "music in the air!"

A dozen at first, then a score, now nearly double that number, with citizens coming up singly, in pairs, or by triplets. And while the majority appeared to be willing to hear whatever the gambler might have to offer in his own defense, no man knew better than Saul Eden how easy it is to set a lynching mob in motion.

Still, a crowd that pauses to listen is never so much to be dreaded, and the Breakneck Sport felt that he was master of the situation, even so early in the play.

As the gambler seemed in no especial haste to begin his defense, ugly mutterings began once more, culminating in an open demand to know just why he had treated Rough House so violently.

Apparently this was the cue for which Saul Eden was waiting, for his calmness vanished as if by magic, and he seemed fairly on fire as he cried out with passionate gesture:

"Why, do you ask me? Because Rough House was trying to play the brute with a lady. Because he was just drunk enough to be all brute, careless of his hands, his words, his deeds!"

"I saw it almost from the start, thanks to heaven! I saw him start up and bar the way as this lady was passing over yonder footbridge. I saw him accost and then assault her, before I could win nigh enough to take a hand in the game."

"Then I dared not burn powder lest the same bullet kill the innocent with the guilty, or Rough House would have perished like a sheep-killing cur, that very instant!"

"Who was it? Whar's the lady which—" began one of the miners, growing excited through pure contagion as he listened to these swiftly passionate words.

Saul Eden flung up an empty hand, and the speaker broke off at once.

"Since I couldn't shoot, I did the next best thing; jumped in and knocked Rough House on the broad of his back, then gave what aid and comfort I could to the young lady, frightened as she was almost into hysterics."

"While I was thus engaged, that cur rallied his senses and tried to drop me with a shot from behind my back. I closed in and knocked up his hand, just as he fired. Then—Rough House took water in earnest!"

A lit of a cheer greeted this grim an-

nouncement, but Saul Eden was not yet through, speaking on with rapidity.

"If Rough House is dead, that's his luck. I meant nothing worse than a thorough ducking, but if so—well, he richly merited it all! I say this, gentlemen, and I'm ready to stand by my word. I was defending a lady whom you all know and respect: one whom I love better by far than all that this world contains beside: Miss Phyllis Dikeman!"

The mine owner flung up a hand as though to check that announcement, but failed. The crowd gave a cheer, then Saul Eden cried, loudly:

"Right there you have it all, gentlemen. If this conduct merits lynching, as you howled a bit ago, so be it: here is my neck: bring on your rope and do your duty!"

The victory was already won, as no man knew better than Saul Eden, but he had his line of conduct marked out, and shrewdly followed it from start to finish.

As the tide turned wholly in his favor, cheers burst from the crowd, and one full-lunged fellow yelled at top of his voice:

"Whooray fer the Sport of Breakneck! Whooray fer Dikeman's gal! Whooray fer 'em both in a lump, an' may we-all soon hev the chaine to drink happiness to 'em both es one an' ondivisible—yell!"

Yell they did, and even above the cheering might have been distinguished the voice of Saul Eden himself, saying amen to it all!

Then, as his uplifted hand once more quelled the uproar, the gambler wholly ignored the mine owner, who tried to cut that sensational scene short, speaking in clear, far-reaching tones:

"Amen, and still amen to that wish, my good friends! 'Tis my dearest hope in life, and if I can win Miss Phyllis Dikeman for a bride, I'll ask no further favor of mankind or of heaven itself!"

With a double purpose came these distinct words, for, coming from beyond that now enthusiastic crowd Saul Eden recognized a man whom he had only too good reason to believe his rival, if not an entirely successful one.

Then, too, he hoped to in a measure compromise the young lady whose name thus crossed his lips, knowing that, if it did not help it surely could not hinder his unscrupulous pursuit.

That rival was none other than Arthur Crossley, looking unusually pale after his recent misadventures, his head bandaged in white, the cloth showing more than one significant stain as he quickened his pace and approached that residence, fearing the crisis had come at last.

Then he caught those words and recognized the speaker, both filling him with fierce indignation and causing him to rush on, splitting the crowd without ceremony, reaching the little cleared space in front to shake a clenched hand at the gambler, as he sternly cried out:

"Drop that, you cur! Only a fool or a knave would make any lady the subject of such—"

Saul Eden flashed for a revolver, as he sharply cut in:

"Eat those words or—chew lead, Arthur Crossley!"

CHAPTER X.

A SLAP IN THE FACE FOR SAUL EDEN.

With those fierce words thus backed up, matters looked warlike beyond the ordinary.

Few men could pull a gun and catch the drop with greater quickness or certainty than the Breakneck Sport, and almost before another one of all present could divine what was coming, the Touchstone foreman was fairly lined, Saul Eden showing teeth as he glanced along that polished tube of death.

At that same moment a shrill scream came from within the house, unmistakably that of a woman, and almost as certainly from the lips of the maiden whose

name had been so prominently brought to the front.

Had no other interference come, Arthur Crossley would have fared but illy, for he never gave thought to flinching or of retreat, while the gambler could have filled him full of holes ere he could draw a gun in his turn.

But the ending was not to come after that fashion, for Roger Dikeman took swift action, giving a cry of angry warning as he grasped the gambler's wrist, forcing the weapon upward and to one side before a shot could be fired.

"Careful, you hot-head!" the mine owner spoke, sternly, as that arm of steel sinews yielded to his efforts. "Would you murder—keep the peace, neighbors! Don't let—quiet, all!"

That well-meant warning and appeal combined was hardly necessary, after all, for several of the citizens jumped in front of the Touchstone foreman when they saw Dikeman grapple with the Breakneck Sport, and even had he felt so inclined, Crossley could not have drawn a gun.

On the other side, Saul Eden yielded gracefully, no doubt feeling that he could fairly afford so to do, all things considered.

"All right, Mr. Dikeman," he said, surrendering his weapon and making a neat bow as his wrist was freed by the mine owner. "I most sincerely beg your pardon, as well as that of the young lady whose name has unfortunately been spoken, just now. My great and earnest love for her must plead my excuse, sir."

"That in itself is an insult to any lady!" sternly cried Crossley, as he jerked free from those restraining clutches to confront the gambler of Breakneck.

In no wise loth to meet such an issue, Saul Eden with quick force pushed the mine owner to one side, then bowed toward his angry rival, showing his strong teeth in a half-wolfish smile as he spoke with almost painful politeness:

"You are no lady, Mr. Crossley, but if you care to resent an actual insult—"

Even as he began, Saul Eden saw a tall, handsome, dare-devil looking stranger push more to the front, deftly stepping in front of the injured foreman and bowing as hat came off, followed by the suave speech:

"Beg your pardon, sir, but just play I'm a substitute, won't you?"

A stranger to Saul Eden, if not an equal stranger to the others there assembled, but hardly a stranger to the reader.

Hotspur Hal had come to town, and this was to be his public introduction to the Breakneckians.

His supremely cool action took the gambler aback for a moment, but no matter what else he might be, Saul Eden was neither cur nor fool, and swiftly rallying he spoke, sharply:

"Who gave you leave or license to chip? What do you mean, anyway?"

"Fun or business, just as you may prefer, dear boy," blandly answered the Sport from Hard Luck, smiling as upon the best of friends, at the same time waving hand toward the Touchstone foreman.

"Mr. Crossley is my friend, and as a rule, I don't know a gentleman better able to answer for himself; but just now he's a good bit under the weather, as you all can see—"

"Does he hide behind your back, sir?" "Stand aside, Arlington, and let me answer that!" sternly cried the foreman, though his cheek now showed a rill of blood which came from beneath one of those slightly disturbed bandages.

"Quiet, please, pardner," said the Hard Luck Sport; then turning again toward the gambler, he added: "I addressed you as one gentleman might another, sir. Don't make me think I've lowered myself by so doing, I beg of you."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Arlington. Sometimes I'm called Hotspur Hal. I'm just in from Hard Luck. As you can see, I'm

no great wonder of a man; but such as I am, I'll take exquisite pleasure in serving as a substitute for one far better, but who just now happens to be under the weather."

"And so hides behind your back, by way of proving his manhood?" the gambler sneeringly cried, sticking to his one point with dogged grip.

"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" cried Roger Dikeman, feverishly desirous to avoid any actual conflict, most of all just then and there.

But that repeated taunt stung Crossley past endurance, and, pushing Hotspur Hal aside with nervous arm, he crossed that space at a single pantherish leap, striking the Breakneck Sport fairly in the face with an open hand.

On guard though he ever was, Saul Eden did not anticipate such an assault as this, and the blow was delivered before he could fairly divine what was coming, those labor-hardened fingers leaving distinct impress upon his clean-shaven cheek.

The gambler reeled back and aside with a savage cry, his footing disturbed so far that he stumbled off the step before that door.

Swift as thought Hotspur Hal grappled with the infuriated foreman, and with restless might fairly shoved him over the threshold and inside the house, where Phyllis caught him in her arms with a low, agitated cry of mingled joy and affright.

This was a bit better than the Hard Luck Sport had figured on, but content with that fleeting glance, he pulled the door to, then stood with his back to it and hands gripping a brace of business-like revolvers.

Saul Eden rallied as swiftly as possible, eyes fairly on fire, cheek bearing a divided brand too plain for mistaking, hands reaching for a gun as he glared around in quest of his rival.

"Steady, there!" sharply warned the man from Hard Luck, not yet actually taking the drop, but ready to do so on the slightest provocation.

"I'll kill him—I'll eat him up as I would—where is the infernal cur?" raged the gambler, beside himself with savage rage, as, his smitten cheek burned as though blistered with fire.

"An' stiddy the rest o' ye, gents, all!" cried another voice, coming from near a corner of the building.

There Bummer Billy Bedad was standing, his rear fully protected by the wall, his mouth on a wide grin, as he looked over a couple of huge revolvers, the dark muzzles of which slowly swept back and forth, as if their owner meant to cover the whole assembly with his battery.

"I'm Bummer Billy from Tougher Luck a Sht, an' thar's my side-pardner. What he says goes, an' ef ye don't b'lieve it, jest call me a howlin' liar who wouldn't take a snifter ef he could—an' then the brass band begins fer to play a funeral march—amen!"

With husky volubility came this characteristic warning, and if any of the "tough nuts" then present had felt tempted to chip in on the gambler's side, they paused for a second thought.

Only two men confronting more than half a hundred, but those two held the drop, and both looked like men to make the most of such an advantage should they be closely pressed.

Saul Eden, though fairly beside himself with vicious rage, still could realize how impotent he was just then; and this gave the Hotspur a chance to add another brief warning.

"Don't think we're trying to run the whole town, gentlemen, for that is 'way beyond our ambition. I'm simply playing true to a good and wcrthy pard, so—listen, please!"

"Crossley has been badly injured, as you surely saw for yourselves. Though willing, he is not fairly able, and so—here I am, offering to fill his shoes to the best of my poor ability."

"If he is cowardly enough to hide behind your back—"

"Only a coward would repeat that slur, after having his face slapped in public by the gentleman ne essays to brand," sternly interposed the Sport from Hard Luck, partly lifting a muzzle that way as he spoke. "And unless you were all cur, sir, you would make allowance for that evident disability."

The Hard Luck Sport seemed more than willing to precipitate matters if such proved to be agreeable to the gambler, but knowing how fatally he was handicapped just then, Eden made no positive move.

But there was an ominous stir taking place amongst the crowd, and suspecting a coming diversion which might completely turn the tables in favor of the enemy, Bummer Billy sung out right briskly:

"Fa'r warnin' the pile o' ye all, gents! I'm right hyar, cocked an' primed an' triggers sprung to a hair! I kin thread a needle in a whirly-gust, or drill a cobweb eendways with a single pellet! I'd rather fight then eat, an' pritty nigh as quick es to take a five-finger dose o' git-thar-in-a-hurry!"

That the bummer was ready to use his tools to the best of his ability, none who saw and heard him right then could doubt; and if any rush had been contemplated, the effort was postponed until a more propitious moment.

This brief space of time had been well employed by Saul Eden, and with a strong effort of will he smothered his passions so far as surface display was concerned, and when Hotspur Hal again offered himself as a substitute for his friend, the gambler had an answer ready.

With a gesture which called attention of all to his empty hands, he spoke with wonderful calmness.

"My quarrel is not with you, sir, but with Mr. Crossley. Until I have effected a full settlement with that—person, you are safe in spitting forth slurs and insults. Afterward—but time enough for that when my original quarrel is determined."

"I have told you repeatedly that Mr. Crossley is physically incapable of meeting a strong, healthy antagonist like you appear to be, sir. If you still insist, after this frank statement—"

"I more than insist, sir!"

"Then I'll put my hint into plain words and brand you as a—"

The door swung quickly open behind Hotspur Hal, and an open hand was slipped deftly across his hot lips, cutting that denunciation short.

Arthur Crossley was coming to the front once more, and there was more of anger than of gratitude in his tones as he spoke to the Hard Luck Sport first of all.

"This is my quarrel, not yours, Mr. Arlington. I'll try to thank you later, but for now—oblige me by falling a bit to the rear!"

A brief cheer burst from the crowd at this crisp speech, but Crossley paid no attention to other than the gambler, Saul Eden, lifting a hand that way to give it a menacing shake, as he spoke again:

"As for you, Saul Eden, I'm ready to meet you when and where you see fit to nominate, after any fashion, at any odds, and I declare right now and here that I'll make you beg for mercy or die!"

"You can't try that on any too quickly for me, you braggart!" eagerly cried the Breakneck Sport. "Come right out here and we'll—"

Crossley seemed fully as willing for the supreme test, but others were more considerate, and Roger Dikeman once more interposed.

"I beg a truce, gentlemen, all!" he cried, earnestly, one hand lifted to back that appeal, the other resting lightly upon his foreman's nearest shoulder. "You can all see that Crossley has been seriously injured, and is not fit to meet

such a man as Eden, right now; but later on—"

"Will you agree to give me a chance, later on, Mr. Dikeman?"

"Yes, unless—"

"All right!" yielded Eden, gracefully. "Your word is my bond, Mr. Dikeman, and wait it is. Meanwhile, I'll go take a look for that other cur, Rough House!"

CHAPTER XI.

MAKING KNOWN THE UGLY TRUTH.

With a bow and a smile for the mine-owner, a sneer and taunting look for the other two men, Saul Eden turned away and moved leisurely off in the direction of the footbridge spanning the river.

Arthur Crossley started in that same direction, plainly disinclined to accept the truce which another had proposed in his behalf; but that unusual excitement, combined with the heavy blows which had fallen upon his skull of late, produced a sudden faintness before which he staggered and would surely have fallen but for the support lent him by Roger Dikeman.

This caused some little confusion, which was by no means lessened when the door was swung wider to permit the passage of fair Phyllis, who gave a half-choked cry of mingled fright and grief.

A streak of fresh blood was marking his face, now pale and looking ghastly as that of a corpse; sorry spectacle for the eyes of fond love to gaze upon, surely!

And if there had been any doubt before this, there was little room left now for doubting just where the young woman's affections were located, for in her sore distress poor Phyllis forgot all else save that one thing: her lover was surely at the point of death!

"Which he was a liar, an' billy-be-doodled ef I didn't know it the fust jump-off!" declared the bummer as he leaned with back against the wall, leisurely taking notes. "An', my pardy: gethumper to git thar! Ef he hadn't a holy scrowdger, then why not?"

For Hotspur Hal, pausing barely long enough to make sure of the situation, which he took in at a single keen glance, again sprung to the front just when he was needed the most, relieving Mr. Dikeman of that awkward burden, speaking cheerily to the nearly fainting foreman:

"Take a brace, pardner, if only to reassure the young lady. Steady, now! You're right as right, and in a couple o' weenty minutes—this way, old fellow, just for good luck!"

With gentle force the Hard Luck representative swung Crossley around and headed for that open doorway, smiling blandly as he met the anxious looks of both father and daughter.

"Nothing to take a worry over, good people, and with a couple of hours' rest he'll be as sound as ever."

Almost before the Touchstone foreman could fairly realize what was going on, Arlington had him within the house, then did the next best thing: turned the injured man over to his sweetheart for further care, yet with an adroitness which robbed the action of any especial significance.

"If you would kindly get him a sup of water, Miss Dikeman? It's only a touch of the morning sun upon a cracked crown; nothing to worry over, though, just a bit awkward at first glimpse. You will? Thanks, awfully!"

Doing as he himself would be done by, Hotspur Hal checked Roger Dikeman as the mine-owner started to follow the young couple from hall to sitting room, deftly veering him in the opposite direction, only ceasing those kindly efforts when they were safely within the home-office where still lingered the scent of the gambler's cigar.

Kicking the door to behind them as he entered, Hotspur Hal rattled on at a lively rate, giving a surface-view of the situation, yet fairly well explaining the present condition of the Touchstone foreman.

It was simply "a fellow feeling" which led him to take this course, for the fancy struck him that his newly found friend might need a bit of assistance in his love-making.

"Of course it'll not count for long, or cut any serious figure after he's taken a bit of rest and quiet on the half-shell, but the honest truth of the matter is pretty much like this: Crossley has had a mighty rough row of stumps to hoe, and if he missed the sexton 'twas by the bare skin of his teeth."

"But, I thought—"

"Of course you did. So would 'most anybody. So would I if I hadn't known better, not through any extra smartness on my part, but because—and so, you see—just as I hinted, first-off."

"A lively racket while she lasted, and Crossley held up his end better than any ten out of nine lads you could pick up on a venture; he rung pure metal with every clip!"

"Then he was—held up?"

"Held up and held down, only he wouldn't stay down, you understand?" briskly replied the Man from Hard Luck, speaking against time and caring precious little what words might cross his lips, just so they kept the agitated mine-owner off the too dangerous track.

But the old gentleman's anxiety was far too great for easy control, and after several vain efforts he fairly exploded.

"The money—what about the money, sir? Surely Arthur didn't—he has brought the cash in safety?"

Hotspur Hal was spared the necessity of answering this almost fierce demand, for just then the office door swung open, and Crossley appeared, with Phyllis close at his elbow.

More plainly than ever did the mining superintendent betray the effects of his recent mishaps, now that the heat of rage and hatred had fairly died away, leaving his face extremely pale and haggard, more like that of a strong man who has just passed through a serious spell of illness.

Forgetful of self, Phyllis betrayed her solicitude, but Crossley gently put the maiden aside for the moment, facing the agitated mine-owner and speaking in husky, far from certain tones:

"I did my level best, Mr. Dikeman, but luck was against me in this, even as it has been ever since—"

He broke off as the old gentleman flung up a hand, at the same time giving nervous glance and half-nod toward the Sport from Hard Luck.

When he saw fit, few men living could more readily catch a hint than Hotspur Hal, and seeing how embarrassed the mine-owner appeared to feel by the presence of a stranger, he quietly spoke:

"Don't let me interfere, gentlemen. I'll hold myself ready to answer any call you may make, more than willing to serve where I can, but for now, I have a bit of business which needs looking after. Good-day, all!"

He turned to depart, but Crossley preferred otherwise, grasping an arm as the Sport would have passed, speaking quickly, earnestly:

"No, no! Don't go, Arlington. I want you to—this is my friend, Mr. Dikeman, and I want you to regard him as your friend as well. Only for his brave and generous conduct last night, I wouldn't be here now."

"Touch lightly, pardner!"

"It's gospel truth. I owe you my life. The time may come when I can thank you more heartily, but for now—pity those devils didn't take my life when they took—"

"Then you lost—the money?"

Roger Dikeman spoke with extreme difficulty, shivering visibly as he supported himself by gripping the back of a chair. His face was to the full as pale as that of the foreman, and neither man appeared fitted to carry on this agitating scene.

Hotspur Hal saw this much, but he knew that the ugly truth must be told, sooner or later. He felt that it would

be better for all concerned to get it over as quickly as might be, yet still felt that his presence was a detriment rather than an aid or a comfort.

Giving a frank hand to the mine owner, he spoke with a grave smile:

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Dikeman, and it'll not be my fault if we don't stack up huge friends. As for now, what is lost, may be found, and no game can be called lost while a single card remains unplayed. So—brace up, and hope for the best!"

"I know, but—"

"Of course. And I know that even a friend is considered an outsider when a family consultation is on the tapis, so—see you later all!"

"Don't go, Arlington!"

"Thanks, pardner, but reckon I'll have to," responded the Sport as he gently pushed off the hand which would have restrained him. "I always was too mighty bashful for any sort of use, and right now—I must go!"

"I'll be on hand in a couple of hours, say. Until then—well, reckon I'll go see how that fire-eating friend of ours is working up his nerve for the coming circus!"

With a smile for all and a low bow for Phyllis in particular, the friendly Sport took his departure in good earnest.

In spite of the assurances given, and which they had no cause to doubt were founded upon fact, all save Crossley himself felt relieved by that departure, and he quickly regained his composure when he saw that he must bear the full brunt of that ugly recital.

Feeling that the shortest way is the best, the foreman lumped matters at once, although he choked a bit as he looked into that painfully anxious face before him.

"It's so, sir; the money is—lost!"

"How? Where? By whom?" huskily asked the old gentleman, sinking into a chair as though his legs were failing their master. "I thought you were so sure of —"

"And so I was! I could have sworn the scheme must work smoothly, but now—oh, if those cunning devils had only made a clean sweep of it! If they had killed me while—"

With a low, pained cry Phyllis flung arms around the despondent foreman, kissing him repeatedly while murmuring her gentle reproaches, for the time being forgetful that other eyes were upon them.

"No, no! You should not—you must not talk so, Arthur! It is cruel—you don't know how badly it hurts me to have you say such awful things!"

"It's truth, though," gloomily. "If you only knew how much depended upon getting that money safely here—"

"With that, we might have pulled through safely," muttered the mine owner. "Without it we are—and you can't say just how 'twas lost?"

Crossley shook his head, dejectedly. That was one of the most annoying parts of it all, since total ignorance here meant so much the less chance of recovering the stolen property.

"If I only knew that, 'twould be some sort of consolation. At least we'd have some idea in what direction to look for the money, or upon whom to wreak vengeance if recovering that should prove impossible. As the case now stands—oh, curses cover them from crown to sole! If they had only taken my life with the money!"

Again Phyllis slipped an arm about that bowed form; again she let fall a little shower of warm and loving kisses upon that bent head; and now casting aside all coy disguise the young woman stood forth in her love, pure passion in every tone as she spoke, swiftly:

"No, no, Arthur! You must not—you shall not speak like that! Your life is worth all and more—ten thousand fold more than money or money's worth!"

Again she kissed him, with gentle force lifting his head until their eyes could meet in union with their lips.

A few seconds thus, then the girl turned toward her father, one arm clinging to the stalwart foreman as she reached the other hand forth, speaking hurriedly, earnestly:

"Why struggle longer, father, dear? Why fight against such cruel and unscrupulous enemies? Why not—"

"It's pretty much past fighting, now, I reckon!" muttered Dikeman.

"Then let it go! Let them keep what they have won through such vile trickery and foul scheming. Let all else go and leave this awful place for another which may—oh, father! By the love you feel for me, your only living child, I beg of you to grant me this; come! Come away from here with Arthur and me, to live in peace if not in plenty!"

"Go—whither?"

"Anywhere for that matter!" came the passionate reply. "Anywhere away from this evil section and these wretched criminals! For—oh, my dear ones! They'll murder us all unless—we must go away from here!"

CHAPTER XII.

HOTSPUR HAL LOOKING FOR AMUSEMENT.

Queerly as it sounded at the time, there was a goodly spice of truth in the declaration made by the Sport from Hard Luck; while no being on the face of this footstool was more at home among men, Hotspur Hal was scarcely in his element where the gentler sex was concerned.

That because he held them in such high estimation, the good fellow would have vowed if driven to a corner; and that was at least a portion of the truth, if not all of it.

With no sisters of his own, left without a mother in early childhood, fighting his way through the world as only a brave, high-spirited lad can, Arlington grew to manhood without any close ties on the feminine side, and while worshipping woman in the abstract, he could not feel wholly at his ease while in actual contact with one of that gentle sex.

Doubtless this feeling would wear off when the right time came, for with all his faults Hotspur Hal was right well calculated to make some good woman an extra good husband; but for now, he drew a freer breath as he stepped outside that building, to an instant later catch sight and sound of his queer pard, Bummer Billy Bedad.

"Don't you git in a sweat jest 'long o' me, pardy," came the cool drawl from that quarter. "I kin hold up the side o' this shebang jest as long as she kin hold up me. An' so—didn't ketch ary mo' wet goods in thar than you hed a place to stow 'em inside o' ye—eh?"

Case-hardened against these more or less pathetic appeals from his bibulous chum, Hotspur Hal merely cast a fleeting glance in that direction, then turned his eyes elsewhere without vouchsafing a reply in words.

Although the interval had not been so long, it proved quite sufficient to clear that immediate vicinity of intruders, the crowd evidently having followed the lead set them by the Sport of Break-neck.

The lay of the ground, together with the bend in that path, hindered a fair view of the footbridge, but from that direction came dull sounds which Hotspur readily interpreted as human voices in greater or less excitement.

"Heap sight mo' show fer fun then solid drinks, down yender," dryly hinted Bummer Billy as the Sport stepped down to the level. "Ef thar was ary other way fer to git to town or a saloon—eh?"

"We might as well take a bit of a walk, Billy."

"Down yender ways, pardy?"

"Why not?"

"Thar's whar the soap-chawer went, ye see."

"Eden, you mean? Well, what of that?"

Bummer Billy shrugged his shoulders

as he left his lounging position to sham-ble after his comrade, speaking the while:

"Oh, waal, ef you don't mind, I hain't a-keerin' a cuss. I hain't 'shamed to duck an' dodge, or even to turn tail fer a solid runaway ef matters gits to sizzlin'; but you—"

"Don't you borrow trouble on my account, Billy," lightly interrupted the Hard Luck representative as he moved off in the direction of the river. "There's only one fellow in all that crowd I'd mix up with, and he—well, a yoke of oxen couldn't drag him into a fight!"

"Meanin' him which wanted to buck Crossley?"

"A sick man—yes!"

"Waal, pardy, I hain't pertendin' fer to be hafe-way smart as you shore is on a rule," deliberately said the bummer as he pegged along a bit to the rear of the more dashing member from Hard Luck. "But ef you go fer to set that critter down as a dung-hill, then you're turrible apt fer to git left—bad!"

"Is that so?"

"Which I'm open to bet all my wealth onto the same, pardy. He's bad medicine. He's fight fröm 'way back, when he gits a hustle on. Waal, now, you take a fool's advice an'—don't!"

This was a vastly higher estimate than Hotspur Hal had placed upon the gambler, but as a keen glance into that bristly visage showed him Bummer Billy meant every word which crossed his lips, he smothered the little laugh of scorn which was seeking exit, and spoke more gravely:

"All right, Billy. I'm not going to crowd the fellow, and so long as he keeps to his own side of the fence—"

"Augh! Don't I know?" with a snort of half-disgust, half-admiration. "Ef he does jest that, you'll jump over or scrowdge under, an' then when the circus breaks up, take your davy he done the row-pickin'; don't I know you an' your fool ways, pardy?"

Hotspur Hal laughed lightly at this quip, but then they came in sight of the footbridge from off which Rough House had taken a drop so unceremoniously that morning, and the matter was dropped as by mutual consent.

Their arrival created some little stir, but as neither seemed inclined to "put on frills," acting quietly and discreetly, a few moments later all was going as before their advent.

For the most part the curious citizens were below the bridge, either in the water, or keeping watch from the narrow ledge which ran along the stream only a foot or two above the water's level.

Back of this the bank rose steeply, but the shelf afforded fair foothold, and room for men to pass each other as they shifted positions to suit their changing fancies.

Saul Eden was one of those upon the bridge itself, and without paying further notice to the new comers after a first glance their way, he spoke in clear cold tones, evidently in answer to some query or remark made not long before.

"Of course, I'm sorry to think the fellow has drowned, but—how could I help it? I caught him brutally insulting a lady whom we all honor and respect. There was no other way to stop it, save by killing, and I preferred giving him that chance. So—I punished him. And if that is a crime, make the most of it, gentlemen!"

Whether so or not, Hotspur Hal fancied this speech was mainly intended for his benefit, and with a bland smile upon his face he stepped forward, extending an open hand as he spoke, briskly:

"A crime? Don't you begin to think that way, my dear sir."

"What am I to understand by this, sir?" coldly demanded the gambler, drawing his tall form erect, eyes glowing ominously the while.

"So far from being a crime which merits punishment by rope or shot, dear sir, 'tis deserving a crown of laurels. Shal'!"

The Sport from Hard Luck held forth his hand, smiling even more genially than at the start. Saul Eden gazed keenly into those big blue eyes like one who more than half suspects a hidden trap; but then, just a bit reluctantly, he took the proffered member, curtly saying:

"All right. Shake goes. In the same spirit you offer it, remember!"

"Good enough!" cried the Man from Hard Luck, closing fingers and shaking the white hand most cordially, then adding: "A man would be a genuine porker to ask anything better than that."

"You really mean it, then?"

"Of course, I mean it, else the offer would never have been made. I don't go a hooter on naked politeness, dear boy. I couldn't play a part if you was to bray me in mortar with the actor's compendium."

"All of which means—how much?"

Hotspur laughed lightly, briefly, flashing a look around them.

Bummer Billy, satisfied that his pard was not going to immediately engage in another quarrel, and stirred by a bit of the same curiosity which held the Breakneckians enthralled, had left the footbridge and was even now clambering down to the lower ledge to join in the quest for the missing Rough House.

A number of other men were on the footbridge with the rival Sports, however, and no matter what the outcome might be, there would be no lack of fairly reputable witnesses.

Turning eyes back to the man whose hand he still gripped so firmly the Hard Luck Sport got those fingers in a final squeeze, then let them fall as he spoke in cool, easy tones:

"Well, dear boy, of course you understand that I don't make a common practice of running around the country in search of a quarrel with any other man, but just for this once—eh?"

A faint flush came to the white cheeks of the gambler, and his dark eyes caught a glint of red as he divined what was coming.

Still, he made no sign, merely saying:

"Go on. Give us the rest of it, sir."

"All right, and go on she am! Now," with a coaxing echo entering his tones, "can't you see your way clear to playing I'm Arthur Crossley for this special occasion?"

"Did Mr. Crossley send you here to beg off?" coldly demanded the Breakneck Sport, curling lip drawing back his mustache until the tips of his white teeth were briefly visible.

"He did not, as you very well know," retorted Hotspur, tone and manner changing to suit the words which followed. "And the bare fact of your asking such a currish question proves you cross-bred, Mr. Eden."

"And you?"

"Ah, that's different," with an airy wave of his hand to match. "My record reads far too clearly for any mistake, don't you know? And such being the fact, I can afford to dabble in the dirt for once in a way without making my hands too foul for after cleansing."

"You crow mighty loud for a newcomer, don't you think?" sneered the gambler, forcing a smile in which there was precious little mirth to be read.

"If so, I wear gaffs that can more than make my crowing good," came the pointed retort.

By this time a hint of possible trouble spread throughout the assembly, and for the time being, forgetting the missing Rough House, nearly all hands drew closer to that spot, Bummer Billy coming with the rest, ever ready to back up his dashing pard in whatever might turn up.

Although the stranger Sport made a fairly favorable impression through his fearless conduct in front of the Dikeman residence, it was clear to be seen that the large majority of those then present were in favor of the Breakneck Sport.

Some ugly mutterings were now heard, and ugly looks were by no means lacking. A word from Saul Eden would

be quite enough to fetch matters to a head; but apparently the gambler felt fully competent to manage his own affairs without making any such appeal.

Coolly, deliberately he looked over his eager antagonist, then smiled insolently as his dark orbs came to a rest in line with the blue eyes belonging to the Hard Luck representative.

"Of course, you never boast, or blow your own bazoo?"

"Never louder than the law allows, nor ever say more than I am fully prepared to back up with deeds," as coolly answered the Hotspur, paying no attention to the spectators. "And you are—"

"Engaged, or you wouldn't be so anxious for a match."

"Now we're coming to the point," approvingly cried the Sport, nodding head as he spoke. "That engagement is not so dreadful pressing. If a man was a true-bred Sport, and cared aught for his own credit, or the credit of the town he represents, he'd never fetch that trifle up as a bar to genuine fun."

"What are you trying to get at anyway?"

"Simply this: I'm a man, you claim to be another. Now, as man to man I ask you an enormous favor. Let me slip into the shoes of Arthur Crossley, who is physically disabled for the time being, and act his substitute in every way, shape or manner."

Hotspur Hal spoke like one intensely in earnest, and more than one faint cheer found birth at his bold speech. But Saul Eden shook his head in negation, again leisurely surveying the stranger, to grimly speak a bit later:

"I'll give you the chance you ask for—"

"Thanks, awfully!" interrupted Hotspur, in huge delight.

"After I have fixed Arthur Crossley for the hands of the sexton!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BUMMER BILLY'S RESURRECTION ACT.

"Ketched a bite the fust time o' fishin'!" chuckled an appreciative partisan, thus pointing the retort plainly enough for less gifted listeners and fetching forth a chorus of laughter.

Although this was too plainly at his expense, the Sport from Hard Luck was by no means disconcerted, waving a careless hand toward the merry fellows, then taking his turn at the verbal bat.

"I most humbly beg your pardon, mister man. I took you for a sort of cock of this walk, but now—well, no genuine chief would ever give an acceptance with a string tied to it."

"And none but a traveling fraud would try to win credit for being a chief in a case where he had been repeatedly warned hands off."

Hotspur Hal laughed a bit at this, as though he felt matters must surely be coming his way in spite of all denials; but Saul Eden was not yet through, speaking sharply and so all might hear, yet with a wonderful degree of calmness for a man of his naturally fiery temper.

"All the same, stranger, you don't want to carry off a misapprehension, and so—listen, please."

"I hold my life and honor is mortgaged until after a meeting on equal terms with Arthur Crossley. After that meeting—"

"You may not be worth meeting, don't you know?"

"After that meeting has taken place I'll more than cheerfully give you all the sport you can stomach, in any way, shape, or manner you may elect. Until then—just this:

"Your hints and slurs will be treated with silent contempt, as they deserve. Words will cut no ice with me, but if you go further—under pledge or not—Saul Eden will ever hold himself in readiness to carry his end of a street fight. You understand?"

"Is that intended for a challenge, Mr. Eden?"

"No. It is a simple statement of fact. If you want to crowd matters and take your chances of coming out on top, cut loose!"

As though expecting that thinly masked invitation to produce instant results in the way of a neat little circus, the witnesses scattered on both sides, looking back as they squatted and shuffled away, ready to dodge a whistling pellet as best they might.

But, eager though he appeared to be, Hotspur had no intention of mixing in under rough-and-tumble rules, and in place of a more warlike retort, he laughed aloud like one more amused than irritated.

"How did you know I was such a stickler for rules and regulations, Mr. Eden? Well, if we join in a little mix-up of that nature, you will have to take the initiative, my dear fellow, for I can't."

"Taking water, by glory!" cried one of the Breakneckians, in a tone of mingled disgust and relief.

Bummer Billy Bedad gave a muffled howl at this, indignantly retorting with gestures to match:

"Ax us to take somethin' better'n water, then, an' see how durn sudden we won't take no water! Of all the dry holes on airth I ever bucked up ag'inst, this yer 'pears to be the most out-dryin'est! Two hours in comp'ny, an' ef I've had the luck fer to even smell a man's breath, hope may never chaw a cob-stopper or lick a leak in a jug o' moonshine!"

It was just the light touch of folly which was needed to turn the scales for peace as against war, and amid the laughter with which Billy's lugubrious effort was greeted, Hotspur Hal frankly spoke again:

"Since you look at the matter in that light, Mr. Eden, no gentleman would crowd you further. So, until the field is fairly clear, we'll call it a truce?"

"Just as you like, sir," with a cold bow. "I fancy I've made my position sufficiently clear, so, as you say—afterward!"

Like one who feels he can leave the arena without incurring any imputation of cowardice, the Sport of Breakneck turned away, passing from one end of the footbridge to the river bank, then descending as though to take a more active part in the search for the missing Rough House.

The queerly matched pards moved in the same direction, but more leisurely; and after a brief silence, Bummer Billy dryly murmured as though to himself:

"Ef I was sent to pick up a sucker whar the little fishes was the most plentiest, 'course I'd go an' fix grab-hooks right onto Saul Eden. I guess not!"

Hotspur Hal laughed softly at this thinly veiled sarcasm, turning toward his disreputable-looking mate with extended hand as he spoke:

"Put it there, Billy! I thought I knew my business best, but this is my time to get fooled. He's a tougher nut to crack than I reckoned, and that's a fact!"

"I knowed it, pardy, nur you hain't farly sampled his toughness yit, nuther! Ef he hain't—ef I ever felt dry fer a pizen snort, this is jest the time o' day!"

A doleful wail, but that abrupt change was no surprise to the Hard Luck Sport, since he, too, had noticed how closely those rough-clad fellows were coming, and how greedily they appeared to be listening.

Looking and acting pretty much as though they were to the manner born, and to the full as deeply interested in that quest as any of their present companions, the two pards spent the next few minutes searching for sight or sign of Rough House.

The general opinion seemed to be that the luckless knave had met his death through drowning, no doubt stunned in part or wholly by his awkward fall from the footbridge above.

Just beneath the bridge, and for several rods below, the water was deep, broadening into a considerable pool, with a current running smoothly and

sweeping little blotches of foam from the shallows above.

There the surface was broken by numerous boulders, and a few of these rugged points showed in the water nearly to the footbridge itself.

Bummer Billy had joined in the quest with unusual spirit for one who appeared to have been "born lazy," and now it was his high-pitched tones which drew all eyes that way.

Partial though he might be to another sort of liquid, the trampish individual evidently held no deadly antipathy to water, per se, since he was now wet to his crown through paddling in the river, although just now he was perched upon a rock which barely broke the surface, only a few feet from the right bank of the river.

Billy was flourishing a huge revolver as he cried aloud:

"High-yigh, pards! Durn man-huntin' when a critter kin hev sech fun as—whoo-oo! It's an otter, an' ef 'tain't an otter it's a coon, an' ef 'tain't a coon it's a—hold yer hosses now while I—stiddy be jerks an'—"

Steadying himself upon his none too secure perch, Billy Bedad rested elbows upon his doubled knees, gripping pistol-butt with both hands and holding it at a level, while he squinted ferociously along the none too brightly polished tube, aiming at a particular point where water and land met, near the upper edge of the deep pool.

"What is it you've treed, Billy?" called out Hotspur.

"Coon or otter or—right thar in a hole under the bank which—git ready thar fer to ketch the pizen critter, pards, ef I don't blow 'nother eyehole into the head o' him! I kin shoot to a ha'r, an' I kin see them two eyes which—git out o' thar you—oh, snakes!"

For, just as Billy Bedad was on the point of pulling trigger, a muffled howl burst upon those surprised ears, and with a wild splashing the "game" broke from its cover: neither raccoon nor otter, but—

"Rough House, or I'm a liar!" fairly screamed one of the astonished citizens as he caught a fair sight of the water fugitive.

"Devil or ghost!" howled Bummer Billy, with real or admirably simulated affright, tumbling backward from his slippery perch, but as quickly recovering himself, to shoot along a course which effectually cut off flight in that quarter, so far as the other swimmer was concerned.

Amidst no little confusion Rough House reached land, crawling out of the water and looking as though he would ask nothing better than to take speedy flight; but that was not to be.

As they began to realize how thoroughly they had been deluded, ugly looks and ugly cries began to come from the searchers, and fearing worse treatment still, Rough House hurried over to meet Saul Eden, claiming the gambler's protection against all others.

For a brief space the Sport hung back, frowning blackly, but then, as hints of lynch law began to fly about, he rallied, hand on pistol butt as he stopped in front of that groveling wretch, left hand lifted warningly as he called forth in clear, stern tones:

"Go easy, friends! He pleads drunkenness, and vows never to sin in like manner again if—stand back, please! You can't lynch him without first climbing all over me!"

That seemed quite sufficient to check any rash action, although it failed to entirely placate the more indignant members of the searching party. They seemed to take it all as a personal insult for which Rough House ought to pay penalty.

It was an awkward situation for Saul Eden, after all he had said in relation to that foul insult offered a lady whom they delighted to honor and love, but he made the best of a bad bargain, though

fairly scowling as Hotspur Hal came smilingly that way, speaking easily:

"My dear fellow, do let me help you discipline the knave! He looks half scared to death already, but that isn't half bad enough for one who would abuse a fair lady, and so—let me aid you in correcting him?"

"Stand back, will you?" almost viciously cried the gambler, turning muzzle of pistol that way as he spoke. "Your wanting to jump on the poor devil would be enough to make me espouse his cause, so—stand back, I tell you!"

"Oh, anything to keep peace in the family," lightly answered the Sport from Hard Luck, with an easy bow of acquiescence. "I wouldn't hurt a side-pardner of yours for the world!"

"You're too infernally fresh!" growlingly said the gambler, then giving Rough House a vicious shove with a foot as notice to hurry away, himself following closely.

Hotspur Hal laughed merrily at this rather disorderly retreat, calling out by way of a parting shot:

"I say, Rough-ness, old coon! I'll pay you good wages to get up in public and tell the true story of this neat little dodge!"

Instead of reply or retort, the draggled knave hurried away all the faster, scaling the steep bank and vanishing from view amidst hootings and howlings from the searchers.

Saul Eden followed after, looking dignified enough, yet hardly in as good odor as he had been just prior to that queer resurrection act in which Bummer Billy played so important a part.

Feeling that nothing more was to be made by lingering longer in that quarter the two odd pards likewise climbed back to the land-level and leisurely strolled on until they were fairly apart from the others.

Not until then did either of them speak. Hotspur Hal was first to break the silence, dryly asking his mate:

"Well Billy, what do you think of it all, anyway?"

"Think? What kin I think but that he's a pesky fraud clean through from A to ampersand!"

"Or worse," dryly amended the Sport from Hard Luck.

"Eh? Wuss? Which is—what?"

"You were thinking of Rough House, but I meant the bigger knave."

"An' that thinkin' goes how fur, pardy?"

"Well, it hasn't quite reached a final stopping place, yet, but this much can serve for now; I've got an idea that Mr. Saul Eden was out for a nice little stroll last evening!"

There was far more in tone and look than in words, yet Bummer Billy seemed far from satisfied, asking in lowered tones:

"You mean heap more than you're sayin', pardy; finish it, please!"

"Well, Billy, if Satan was to come to me and ask me to find him a road-agent, I'd go collar Saul Eden the very first thing!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HOTSPUR HAL'S SUSPICIONS.

Although he ought to have been prepared for some such hint as this, Billy Bedad gave start and ejaculation, staring into the handsome face of his comrade for the season with wide-eyed amazement.

The Hard Luck Sport nodded again, mustache curling with grim amusement as though he enjoyed his little sensation.

"For a fact, Billy. I'd hustle around until I found mister man, then tap him on a shoulder and whisper in his nigh ear: 'The devil wants you, pardner, and he wants you mighty bad!'"

The tramp gave a long, low whistle as he stared reflectively at nothing in particular. Evidently this suggestion was an entirely new one to him, and he was not yet ready to express an opinion as to its real merits.

"As for the other and lesser knave, I reckon you summed him up about right, Billy," added the Sport as they moved slowly in the direction of the Dikeman residence. "A fraud of the first water. And, ten to one, the whole affair was a put-up job to bunco the young lady!"

Bummer Billy nodded assent to that much.

"I reckoned that same way when I first sighted the fellow there in the hole," he declared, with a long breath. "I meant to shoot all around him until his nerve gave way, but—"

"Steady, lad!" cried the Sport as he gripped an arm forcibly, eyes caught by a fluttering handkerchief at one of the windows in the house not far ahead.

"Steady goes, but what fer, pardy?"

"Unless I read that sign wrongly, I'm wanted over yonder," with a curt nod to further point his meaning.

Bummer Billy gave a low whistle as he caught sight of that fluttering signal, and then asked:

"What fer me to do, pardy?"

"Wait at ease out here where you can use both eyes and wits, Billy. Keep one eye my way, for I may have occasion to signal you, but don't let any party run in on us without your making noise enough for a fair warning; and least of all Mr. Saul Eden."

"You bet I won't, then, pardy," grimly vowed the tramp, as Hotspur Hal hurried away in response to that summons.

Hotspur Hal found no difficulty in effecting an entrance, for the front door opened wide at his approach, and he received a hurried greeting from Roger Dikeman in person.

"Here, and entirely at your service, sir," tersely reported the Man from Hard Luck, right hand going up in a military salute.

"We heard—we feared—you met with no serious trouble, sir?" asked the mine owner, stammering after a fashion foreign to his usual clear-cut diction.

"Never a bit of it, thank you. And Crossley is no worse, I trust?"

"Better by far, thank heaven," in steadier tones as he signed for the Sport to enter. "I left him in the office. It you will please—"

"Thanks. If I can be of any service, I'm only too happy," declared Arlington, doffing hat and passing with easy swing along the hall to enter the room where he found the injured foreman of the Touchstone, looking much better than when last seen.

A swift glance showed the Sport Phyllis was absent, and ungallant though that may brand him, he felt no little relieved.

"What was all that yelling about, over by the footbridge?" asked Crossley, barely taking time to curtly answer the kindly queries as to his own physical condition.

"We feared you and your friend had gotten into trouble of some sort with Mr. Eden," exclaimed the mine owner, a bit nervously.

To set all doubts at rest by the shortest method, Hotspur Hal told of the queer resurrection through Bummer Billy's keenness, then added:

"Of course there is a bare chance that I may be wrong, but I firmly believe the whole affair was a put-up job between the two rascals."

"Eden and—that other?" faltered Mr. Dikeman, flushing and paling alternately. "Why should they—impossible!"

"Well, I'd naturally prefer thinking that way, of course, but when you take it all into consideration, it looks mightily as though the two fellows were playing in cahoots: eh, Crossley?"

"If I thought so—if I knew Eden was such an infernal scoundrel as all that comes to, I'd hunt him out and shoot him like a dog!" fiercely exploded the foreman.

"There is just a chance I'm doing the fellow an injustice," frankly admitted the sport, now wholly at his ease, since he had only men to deal with. "Rough

House may have hidden in that hole in the bank—"

"How could he so hide?" asked Mr. Dikeman, curiously.

"Easily enough, as I took pains to ascertain. A little eddy right there had eaten a recess, leaving a cover of solid dirt, where enough long grass grew to droop down and serve as a screen.

"What more easy than for the rascal to sink when dropped, swim to that hole, and then lie under cover?"

"But, why go to so much trouble? I can't see—"

"That's easy enough," with a low chuckle. "Eden naturally would want to make a big display of red fire, and as there were plenty of witnesses, Rough House might fare far worse unless he could lie low for the welding-heat to cool off. Then—but, if you prefer, let it go at that.

"As for Eden himself, I believe him capable of still worse deeds; for instance, what odds would you give that he hadn't a busy hand in our little experience last night?"

If Hotspur Hal was playing for a sensation, he had his will, for both master and man gave little cries of amazement, looking fairly stupefied at that significant question.

"Surely not—what on earth can you mean, sir?" fairly exploded Mr. Dikeman, rallying a bit more quickly than the foreman, into whose pale face and glowing eyes now came a gleam of growing belief.

"Well, sir, of course I may be making an ass of myself, as usual, but I'm open to bet the odds that Saul Eden was head and front of the road-agent gang which gave us such a lively deal last evening."

"You surely wouldn't say so much without good reasons, Arlington?"

"Reasons may be perfectly good, yet hardly suitable for putting into plain words, don't you know, pardner? Just take a look backward, and then tell me if there is anything to contradict my belief."

"How could he know about the money? And—even if he should suspect my purpose, how divine that I would take to the Old Trace?"

"Some person divined just that, didn't they?" coolly asked the sport, as he nodded by way of emphasis.

"Of course, but—Eden!"

"Would make an admirable chieftain of midnight masks," declared Hotspur, with a faint echo of admiration for the Breakneck Sport. "He carries his nerve with him, in great chunks. He has a following from among the tougher class of this section: hasn't he, now?"

Mr. Dikeman nodded assent, looking paler and more haggard than before, as little by little those ugly suspicions were growing stronger.

"Yes! And he is at the bottom of all our trouble with the miners, you know, Arthur?"

"And he's trying to get hold of some particularly choice mining property, I'll wager!" cried the sport, like one who had just found a needed clew. "Don't say any more than you like, pray," was his swift addition. "I'm not pumping for secrets, simply trying to smoke out the cunning rascal who knocked our schemes all endways, last night."

"If I thought—if I only knew—"

"Well, pardner, it'll all come out in the end, rest assured of so much. And to help fetch matters to a focus—I sincerely trust Miss Dikeman is fairly well, sir?"

Hotspur turned upon the mine owner, smiling blandly as he put this question, seemingly so foreign to the purpose; but Crossley caught his veiled meaning, and gave a low cry of angry resentment.

"Careful, Arlington! Not even you can with impunity couple the name of that infernal scoundrel with my—with Miss Dikeman!"

Instead of showing resentment at this harsh reproof, Hotspur laughed like one who had made his point, then spoke again, in quick, clear tones:

"You felt that another and more powerful motive was lacking, pardner, and right there I gave it. Now—talk business!"

"While I feel morally certain that this Mr. Eden has been playing dirt all along the line, believing is not convicting, and assertion lacks considerable of being legal proof.

"Casting aside all doubtful points, one fact remains: he has given an insult which would fully justify either of you in turning his toes up to the daisies. Now—listen!"

"Saul Eden is a bad man. I've seen quite enough to settle that one point. A bad man, and he means business from start to finish, too!"

"I'll show him a bit of business which he'll never get over!" the foreman declared, harshly, hands clenching tightly.

"Go easy, pardner!" cried Hotspur, lifting a warning hand. "I was just coming to that point, and so—which is the wisest? To give the scoundrel a show for his life in a regulated duel, with all the customary frills and furbelows, or to go out gunning for him, promiscuously?"

Roger Dikeman gave start and cry at this rather sanguinary hint, but Crossley shook his head in stern negation.

"No, no, Arlington. It's too late for anything like that."

"Why is it, pray?"

"Because I've already given him my word to meet him on the dead level, man to man, life against life. You were a witness, yourself."

Unable to deny this, Hotspur Hal gave a long breath, which was almost a sigh, shaking his head with an air of dissatisfaction.

"It must be," positively added the Touchstone foreman.

Although their acquaintanceship was of recent birth, Arlington knew that this with an unshakable resolution, and yielded the point as gracefully as he found possible.

"All right, then, pardner, and we'll prepare the fine fellow for a high lot on the hillside, according to Gunter," he declared, picking hat from table and rising to his feet, as though the interview had reached its natural limit. "That being so, reckon we'd better be taking a bit of a stroll about this time of day?"

"You mean—"

"That I'd heap sight rather hunt than be hunted," dryly observed the Man from Hard Luck as he flashed a look toward the door. "If only for Miss Dikeman's sake, I'd rather have the preliminaries arranged elsewhere. Understand?"

"You think Eden would come here?" asked the mine owner.

"Or send his representative, yes," was the quick response. "Without we forestall the gentleman, of course. And that is just what I want to do, for, as I hinted just now, the young lady would be none the better for having to listen to fighting chatter."

Crossley sprang from his chair at this, face brightening up and a look of thanks in the eyes which met those of the Sport.

"You're all right, Arlington, and I'm your debtor for the thoughtfulness. We'll go at once, and get it over with. Stay, Mr. Dikeman!" with abrupt change of tone as the mine owner likewise rose to his feet as if to form one of the little expedition.

"Of course, I am going with you, Arthur," the old gentleman said, half-petishly shaking off the hand which caught his arm restrainingly.

"You surely will not—"

"I surely will; why not, pray? It is wholly because of me and mine that you are in this trouble, Arthur, and I'll see you safely through."

Crossley looked appealingly toward the Sport, who gravely spoke:

"If you are dead-set on that point, sir, of course we can't keep you back, even if we wished; which we don't. But, to keep the young lady from suspecting the truth, you can follow us a bit later on. Come, Crossley."

Together the two young men left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

BUMMER BILLY DROPS A HINT.

That tersely put argument had its desired effect, and Mr. Dikeman no longer insisted upon bearing them company further than his own door.

With a few easy words which were calculated to soothe the feminine ear in case any such should be upon the alert, Hotspur Hal turned away from that door, slipping a hand through the young foreman's arm and chattering airily as they moved off in the direction of Breakneck proper.

Considering what had already passed, it was rather more than the Sport expected to win fairly clear without further interruption, and not until they were outside those grounds did he draw a full, free breath.

"That's good enough, if not better, yet, pardner!" he declared in a tone of strong relief. "A woman's all right in her place, of course, but when there is music in the air, that place is—eh?"

For Crossley was withdrawing his arm, frowning darkly as he spoke:

"Drop that, please. We'll not say anything further about—on that particular point, Mr. Arlington."

"Drop it goes, my dear fellow, but in spite of your delicate modesty the fact remains. Still, I wouldn't—by the way!"

Hotspur Hal was using his eyes even more effectively than his tongue, and in addition to Bummer Billy Bedad he took keen note of a tall, well-dressed stranger whose face was turned toward the Dikeman residence.

The tramp was heading to cut that stranger off, but at sight of his comrade hesitated, then read aright the slight gesture which was made by the Hard Luck Sport.

This gesture served a double purpose, for it called Crossley's attention toward yonder advancing figure, and after a brief look, he said:

"It's Maurice Thompson, from Breakneck. I know him."

"And so does Mr. Eden, I reckon?"

"Yes. They are close friends, I believe."

"I rather looked for something of the sort, although this gentleman doesn't appear to be overstocked with gall," dryly observed the Sport, eyeing the stranger critically, and noting his evident embarrassment.

Arthur Crossley was just in the humor to expedite matters, and at once strode in advance, touching brim of hat in cold politeness as he met the other, speaking crisply:

"You were looking for me, Mr. Thompson?"

"Well, something like that, yes, Mr. Crossley."

"All right. You have found me. What is your business, please?"

Mr. Thompson appeared to be a very nice fellow from an every-day point of view, and Crossley knew him as one of the most reputable citizens of which the silver camp could boast; but he was hardly a model representative of such a fire-eater as Saul Eden, and just now he seemed actually embarrassed and at a loss just what to say and how to act.

"Well, sir, it's an ugly bit of business, and I rather—far rather not touch it at all, don't you know?" he hurriedly said, face flushing and perspiration coming to view.

Crossley gave a nod and a frown, then broke in with the query:

"You are from Mr. Eden, I take it, sir?"

Mr. Thompson bowed as the easiest way of answering, and without further ceremony the Touchstone foreman waved a hand toward his companion, curtly adding:

"This is my friend, Mr. Thompson, and Mr. Arlington will serve as my representative. Kindly make your further arrangements with him, sir."

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Thomp-

son," declared the Sport from Hard Luck as he stepped to the front with genial smile and extended hand. Shake! Nothing like getting close together in these little affairs, even though we may have to slit each other's throat before the hour runs its full course. Eh? Don't you think so?"

"It's a bad matter; a must unfortunate affair!" declared the envoy in tones which could scarcely be called hilarious.

"Well, I beg of you not to say it, even if you really think that way, my dear fellow," cried the Sport, slipping hand through arm and moving away at a leisurely pace while adding: "It almost makes me want to fight when I hear a fellow croaking after that melancholy fashion. And it really wouldn't be good form for the seconds to fall to clapper-clawing before their principals could have a full settlement: now would it?"

Arthur Crossley failed to catch the reply made by Mr. Thompson, but the admirable coolness of his own representative served to bring a faint smile to his lip, which had not entirely faded away when the sound of shuffling footsteps caused him to turn quickly.

Those sounds were being made by Bummer Billy, who merely waited until his partner moved away with Saul Eden's representative, then hastened to join the Touchstone foreman.

"Who's him, ary how, boss?" asked Bedad, with nod of head and pointing thumb. "Nother one o' them durn galoots which—"

Crossley crisply gave the desired information, just then feeling in no humor for idle gossip, thoroughly though he appreciated the service which this rough diamond had rendered of late.

But Bummer Billy was not to be so easily rebuffed, and with a dingy forefinger tapping his lips, winking and blinking as he nodded head in significant manner toward the point where the two men were then engaged in busy talk, he huskily muttered:

"You want to keep your lookouts wide open, boss, fer thar's heap sight o' dirty work a-gwine on all 'round ye, or I'm a howlin', har jest down from headwaters: yes!"

"You mean—what, Billy?"

"That the hull blame thing is a put-up job fer to down a good man fer keeps; an' that means jest you, no less, pardy!" earnestly vowed the tramp, with another series of nods and winks and blinks.

"Well, those who set up the job may catch burnt fingers before all's done," grimly observed the mine superintendent.

Bummer Billy gave a subdued howl of gratification at this, for words were more than substantiated by squared jaws and glinting eyes. If ever mortal man was in deadly earnest, Arthur Crossley was right then and there.

"Good enough, pardy!" exploded the tramp, in high glee, as he caught a hand and gave it an enthusiastic shake, pump-handle fashion. "I was jest a weenty bit skeered that you'd play too easy at the jump-off, an' so let that pizen critter hev the best eend o' the game; but now—"

"Not unless Saul Eden can prove himself a better man in every way than I am!" sternly cut in the foreman.

"Which he never cain't do on a level, boss!"

"He picked the quarrel himself, not I," declared the other, naturally enough viewing that particular point through glasses of his own especial tint. "He wanted a row, and now—I'll down him for keeps, or he'll lay me out too cold for skinning!"

Bummer Billy grinned and nodded his full appreciation of the spirit thus displayed, adding the words:

"Good enough, an' better yit a heap! Ef it comes to a show-down whar guns an' straight shootin' counts fer game—"

"I fancy that will be the outcome," glancing toward the seconds, who were still in full view, busily chatting to-

gether. "Yonder is the man Eden sent as his representative."

"Looks pritty white, too, yit he mought ketch himself into a heap sight better business," declared Bedad, after a glance in that direction, then coming back to the particular point he wished to make.

"When it comes to a show-down, boss, jest you stick to your knittin' an' never don't mind nothin' else. Keep both peepers peeled wide open, an' never leave 'em off that pizen critter so long's a weenty kick is left into the hide o' him: now don't ye, pardy!"

"Eden, you mean?"

"You jest bet yer sweet life—ferever! Jest stick to him like a blister-plaster, boss! Don't you never mind anything else. We'll hold all the rest of 'em dead level; yes, we will, now!"

Bummer Billy spoke with earnestness: too much earnestness, in fact, if he wished to escape suspicion as to his disinterestedness.

Arthur Crossley was a fairly easy-going young fellow as a rule, and just now he had far more than enough worry and trouble to fill both brain and heart; but this remarkable solicitude, displayed as it was by an almost utter stranger, turned his gloomy thoughts in a different direction.

He faced the seeming tramp squarely, one hand shooting out to grip a shoulder and hold Bedad steady, eyes keenly scanning that face with its ugly mask of stubble and dirt.

"Who are you—what are you, anyway?" he demanded, sternly. "Why do you exhibit such a strong interest in me and my affairs?"

Bummer Billy met that glowing gaze without flinching, his grin growing broader and his eyes winking shrewdly the while.

"Out with it, I say!" cried Crossley, giving the fellow a bit of a shake as additional warning. "Of course you've played me white so far, on the surface at least, but—"

"You jest bet I hev, boss!"

"I believe it myself," admitted the foreman, yet unshaken in his newly formed purpose. "But that doesn't cover the point. Why are you so deeply interested in me and my affairs, I repeat?"

Again Bummer Billy winked and nodded, grinning equal to any proverbial cat from Cheshire.

"Waal, now, pardy, mebbe 'tain't so mighty much in you, as it is in—eh? Who be I? What be I? The blamedest driest feller in seventeen States, full o' dust an' drought an' ashes an' whirlygusts o' red-hot sand fer to help parch a pore devil's coppers—no less!"

Another of the swift changes to which the bibulous tramp seemed partial, but that this one meant something more than a mere evasion of an awkward question Arthur Crossley quickly divined.

He likewise caught the sound of approaching footfalls, and turned his head far enough to glimpse the tall figure of Roger Dikeman drawing that way, while from an opposite eye-corner he could see that the seconds across the way had apparently reached an understanding, since they, too, were facing about.

"Tell you furdur when thar's a better show," hastily whispered Billy Bedad, just before turning to bob head and scrape foot in honor of the mining magnate of Breakneck.

Roger Dikeman barely recognized this meek tribute, something of his real anxiety revealing itself in his slightly unsteady tones as he addressed his sturdy young foreman:

"Nothing gone wrong, I trust, Crossley? I saw you lingering out here, and deemed it best to join you in case—"

"We met the representative sent by Eden, you see, sir," quickly explained the superintendent. "Maurice Thompson. Yonder he goes, now!"

As a matter of fact, the two seconds had shaken hands and separated but a

moment before, Mr. Thompson hurrying off in the direction of town, doubtless to report progress to his principal, while Hotspur Hal came leisurely toward his friends with smiling visage.

"Well?" asked Mr. Dikeman, unable to wholly suppress his anxiety over the outcome.

"About as well as you could expect to have it, anyway," declared the Sport from Hard Luck. "Mr. Thompson showed himself the perfect gentleman. Wish I might say as much for his principal, but I always did despise a liar!"

"You agreed upon terms, then, Arlington?" asked Crossley.

"We did, and if the result isn't a jolly little circus, then I'll never make a prediction again! You've got to down the rascal, pardner; just naturally got to down him, now!"

"I'll do my level best, you can depend on that," grimly vowed the Touchstone foreman. "When and how are we to meet?"

"Just as soon as we can get together comfortably, with guns. Wait for the word. Then fire and go as you please for the rest of it."

CHAPTER XVI.

A FIGHT TO A FINISH.

The Hard Luck Sport uttered this sanguinary speech much as he might have announced a most innocent merrymaking, and Roger Dikeman shrunk away from him with a little shiver; but not so Arthur Crossley.

His dark eyes glowed vividly and his face filled with a fierce ardor which spoke ill for the future of the Breakneck gambler.

"Good! You couldn't have suited me better, Arlington! I don't want there to be the ghost of a chance for a slip-up on it. I'll kill Saul Eden or go down in death myself!"

"Make it him, boss; an' I'll 'gree fer to do the hollerin' on our side," cheerfully cut in Bummer Billy. "An' then we'll all git stone-blind drunk! I kin feel—oh, grief o' mournin' despair! Ef I don't ketch a weenty snort o' heavenly delight an' concentrated bliss afore long, thar'll be a pore, lonesome corpus onto your han's; yes, they jest will, now!"

"Brace up for a little longer, Billy, and after we've reached the crowing pitch you shall have enough bug-juice to go swimming in, if you want it that way," gaily declared the Hotspur.

"Holy smoke o' sackerfizin' Abraham!" gasped the bummer, staggering like one under a burden of dizzy delight. "Don't—don't ye talk that-a-way, pardy, onless ye really want fer to see me go up like a b'loon o' monumental bliss an'—grap a huff an' pull me down afo' I git clean out o' reach, somebody!"

Even Roger Dikeman was obliged to smile faintly at this ridiculous exhibition, the tramp seemed so thoroughly in earnest; and with the awkwardness a trifle relieved thereby, the quartette moved on in the direction of town.

While on their way Hotspur Hal entered a little more into detail, explaining how they had reached an understanding as to the duel, declaring that in all his past experience he had seldom met up with a more agreeable adversary than this Mr. Thompson.

"I told him as much: I really couldn't help it, you see? He pleased me so mighty much that, to prove it, I offered to make it a four-handed game, with he and I to hold up the other points! And don't you know, he actually seemed—er—well, if not exactly shocked, mighty nigh it!"

Crossley laughed at this characteristic speech, then saying:

"I can imagine poor Thompson's face when you said that, Arlington! He's clean white, and sandy enough as the rule runs, but he'd just as soon take a header from a tall tree-top as to play principal in a duel, unless to wipe out some deadly insult or injury."

The Sport gave a long, low whistle at

this, brows arching in surprise as he looked and listened.

"You don't say so! But—why should such a fire-eater as Saul Eden elect him as a second, then? I can't understand that part of it!"

"To tack on a bit of decent respectability, perhaps," dryly suggested the Touchstone foreman. "But—here we are, and from the looks of it, we'll have no lack of witnesses!"

And so it surely seemed.

All Breakneck seemed astir, and from the many curious looks cast their way, the newcomers readily divined the truth: that already the prospective fight to a finish had become known, and the factions were so soon taking sides as to the final outcome.

It did not take many minutes to decide one fact: Saul Eden could count up the greater numbers of adherents, although the better dressed, more reputable seeming citizens, were as a rule, in favor of his adversary.

Although street fighting was by no means a novelty in Breakneck, while an occasional "stiff" was supplied by one of the sundry free-and-easy resorts where the sportively inclined population as a rule passed their leisure hours away, a regular duel, conducted fairly under the code of honor, was something to stir sluggish blood.

Saul Eden was distinctly visible, for he was notable figure under almost any circumstances, and while he himself was coldly reserved, there was an abundance of his money flaunting in view.

In no other section does the gambling fever run higher or more reckless, and now loud offers of light odds were being cried aloud that Saul Eden would "come out jay-bird!"

One enthusiastic partisan even rushed up to Hotspur Hal with both hands full of both coin and paper, tauntingly "shooting off his mouth."

"Five to four in any figures that Eden downs Crossley without half trying! Money talks, and I'm its mouthpiece! Five to four, and itching for a taker! Where's the Crossley men? You look like one of 'em, pard?"

"May I ask why you think so, dear fellow?"

"Oh, you look so blame miserable and down in the mouth," frankly answered the citizen, amid a wild chorus of yells and laughter.

The Hard Luck Sport was quite as willing to take as to give, and joined easily in the laugh at his own expense, although he saw the gambler was smiling maliciously at that discomfiture as he surely deemed it.

Moving a little nearer where Eden was standing, Hotspur Hal gave a nod which brought the odds-layer eagerly that way with his money, crying out as he came:

"All you lacked was a bit of nerve, pardner, and I reckoned I knew how to touch that up. Here you are: five to four that Saul Eden comes out on top of the heap, and even money that he kills his man without a serious hurt himself! Or—I'll take two to one that he lays Crossley out cold without a break of his own skin!"

The fellow seemed almost viciously in earnest, but Hotspur Hal was cool as ice where the other grew hot and hotter.

"I never gamble on human life, stranger, from principle," he said, making each word distinct to more ears than those he was ostensibly addressing. "But there's one thing I'm ready to do, and that is this:

"If you are really honing to gamble, I'll back nerve and genuine manhood to a finish. Shall I propose such a test, Mr. Eden?" turning squarely upon the Breakneck Sport and bowing easily.

In spite of his nerve, the gambler gave a little start at this unexpected shaft, and changed color perceptibly before he could find the right answer to give this audacious stranger.

"One thing at a time, if you please," his retort came, harshly. "After I have settled one fraud for good and all, 'twill

be time enough to tackle another—of your size and dimensions!"

"Thanks, awfully. A fellow can't give greater compliment to another than to call him after his own model," coolly retorted the Hotspur, genial as a June morning. "As for the rest of it, I'll bear your implied promise in mind, for I'll be only too happy to read you a lesson at any time, on any terms."

"You crow loud for a dung-hill, Mr. Eden. But now—to business, gentlemen!"

Saul Eden shrugged shoulders like one who disdains to follow up a retreating adversary, and again the Sport from Hard Luck lifted his voice so that all might take note and act accordingly.

"Quiet and order, gentlemen all! Mr. Thompson will kindly make known the terms and conditions agreed upon before we proceed further."

Instant calm succeeded that half-riot, and taking advantage of the opening offered, Maurice Thompson sprung upon an empty barrel standing handy, speaking distinctly to the eager listeners.

"I don't suppose there is any need of my telling you just how this little disagreement came about, my friends," he began, speaking easily. "What you most wish to know I take it, is just how that quarrel is to be wound up; and right here you have the terms and conditions."

"The tools are to be revolvers, owner's choice, and two per man. The distance will be from one corner of the street to the next one, as a starter. At the word the principals will be at liberty to open fire from that range, or to advance at will, just as seems wisest to each. And after the word has been given, no man from the outside can interfere or aid, except one of the men goes down, and then only his second, until that second is willing to admit his principal is fairly worsted."

As he proceeded, Mr. Thompson found his tongue growing just a bit tangled up, yet he contrived to make his meaning fairly clear to the interested audience, which, after all, was the main point.

As Thompson stepped down from his perch, Hotspur Hal promptly leaped that way, speaking clearly and tersely:

"One further word, gentlemen. This is a fight to the finish, remember. Once started, it must go on until one or both of the principals go down in death or disability. Of that disability, we, the seconds, are to be sole judges. If any other man interferes in any manner before the fight ends fairly, Mr. Thompson and myself have sworn to use our guns without mercy."

"And we will shoot to kill," forcibly declared the gentleman named.

Hotspur Hal stepped down from the barrel, only to have his place instantly taken by Bummer Billy Bedad, who was greeted with a great howl of mingled cheers and derision.

Little the tramp cared for that, swinging ragged hat high in air as he fairly howled for the amendment he wished to make.

"An' ef ary one o' the two gents lays down 'thout ketchin' a blue pill inside o' himself, he's to be declared the loser o' the fight, an' then kicked clean out o' Breakneck, as a durned fraud—amen!"

"Agreed on my side," quickly cried Hotspur Hal. "How is it with you, Mr. Thompson, pray?"

"Agree to anything and everything," impatiently cried the gambler, with a gesture to his second. "I'm in a hurry to get this thing over, for I've an engagement which I can't well postpone."

"With Rough House, is it?" maliciously retorted the Sport from Hard Luck, but if Eden heard he paid no outward heed.

These essential preliminaries having been adjusted to the satisfaction of both sides, matters progressed more rapidly.

The principals were escorted at once to their respective stations, already marked out, the crowd ranging itself to will, both with an eye to safety and a fair view of the coming circus.

While placing his man, Arlington took covert occasion to feel his hand and pulse, finding them steady and firmer far than he had any expectation.

"You'll do, pardner," he declared, with a brief chuckle which gave evidence of relief in no small measure. "Don't spare your first shots, but send 'em in swift. There's plenty to fall back on, and even a snap-shot may turn his toes up when you wouldn't expect it."

"Spend your worriment on Eden, my friend, for it's lost on me," coolly assured the Touchstone foreman. "I mean to kill or to cripple him. The first, for choice, but either way, Saul Eden goes down this day!"

"That's the way to talk it, pardner! And now—all eyes open! I give the word, but you've got to do the rest!"

With that by way of final warning the Hotspur fell back, lifting an armed right hand as he took position where he could command both ends of that list, eyes flashing back and forth to make sure all was in readiness ere the fatal word should pass his lips.

A breathless pause, then—

"Ready! Fire!"

The instant that signal passed Arlington's lips the duelists sprung into motion, Saul Eden running at speed toward his enemy, yet darting erratically from side to side in order to confuse the aim of his rival if possible, his own revolver barking viciously at almost every bound.

On the contrary, Crossley made but a couple of long, swift strides, then came to a halt, with pistol-arm rising straight and stiff in front of himself, lingering a moment or two for surer aim before he fired.

Twice the Touchstone foreman fired without checking his rival, whose second revolver had already come into play; then, with an involuntary cry which spoke volumes, Arthur Crossley dropped his smoking pistol, and fell to earth, while Hotspur Hal leaped forward, crying sternly:

"Hold! on your lives! My pard is down and the fight is ended!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INTERCHANGE OF COMPLIMENTS.

Only a trifle less prompt to take action was Maurice Thompson, that gentleman, waiting barely long enough for all to see that the Sport from Hard Luck was taking the initiative.

There was an outcry from the eager spectators, and an instinctive surge in the direction of the fallen duelist, but thanks to the prompt action taken by the seconds, that rush was checked in its incipency:

"Hold your places, everybody!" shrilly cried the citizen who seconded the Sport of Breakneck, shaking revolver above his head by way of adding emphasis to his speech. "Fair play, gentlemen. Give Mr. Crossley a chance to decide—"

A deep-pitched roar from all along the double lines fairly drowned those well-intentioned words, for all could see by this time that the Touchstone foreman had not gone down without good cause; red blood was flowing in no mean quantities, even before swiftly-moving Hotspur could reach the side of his still luckless friend.

Saul Eden stopped short as his rival staggered and fell, now in a fierce, half-crouching attitude, with gun resting over a curved arm, finger on trigger and the double sight in pitiless line with his enemy.

There was murder in his pale face, just then, and only for the published conditions, backed up by both Hotspur and Thompson, he would have rendered victory doubly sure by deliberately shoot-

ing the fallen man as he lay in his own blood.

"You've caught it—hird!" cried Arlington, in a tone of fierce chagrin, as he won the side of his principal to see the red blood flowing from right breast. "Caught it through and through, worse luck!"

Turned sick and faint by that stinging yet benumbing stroke of lead, Crossley had fallen like a man who had lost his lower limbs all in a breath; but even so quickly he began to rally, choking back a groan and crying out in fierce if shaken tones:

"No, no! I'm not—I can fight for—let me up and—"

"Steady, pardner!" cried the Sport, catching the wounded duelist in his strong yet tender grasp. "You're hit too mighty hard for any further play, so—go easy, son!"

But Crossley struggled with rallying force, his husky tones growing clearer and his voice rising higher in his savage chagrin.

"No, I say! Let me up. Hands off, for I can—ready there, Saul Eden!"

"Give the hot-headed fool his will, can't you, there?" shrilly cried the Breakneck gambler, still crouching with gun at a level and death in his heart. "There's plenty more hot stuff where that dose came from, and I don't know a man 'twixt sea and sea to whom I'd rather give it!"

None who heard and saw could for an instant doubt his complete sincerity, but while a number of his adherents cheered both speaker and sentiment, other voices were raised against any such brutal finish.

And Roger Dikeman, rallying with an effort from the dismay into which he had fallen at sight of his foreman's luckless plight, now broke from the rank and strode in front of the gambler with uplifted hand, voice stern and even menacing as he spoke:

"Stop! This has gone far enough—too far! Crossley is not fit to fight further, and old as I am, I'll hold the man responsible who is brute enough to insist on another shot!"

Resolved though he was to resume the fight without delay, Crossley turned faint and dizzy as those powerful arms closed about his body to check his worse than foolish efforts; and then Hotspur Hal called loudly for professional aid and assistance.

That was speedily proffered, and with but little more than a glance at the wound, Dr. Green gave his opinion after a fashion which left no room for doubt or indecision.

"The fight is off, gentlemen!" he cried out in tones which all might hear. "Mr. Crossley is too seriously injured to hold a gun, much less to use it to defend his own or to take another man's life."

"Do the best you can for him, doctor," urged the Sport from Hard Luck, resigning his position as Mr. Dikeman came up. "I'll be with you shortly, but for now—"

That sentence was left incomplete, but as he drew back, the Hotspur lifted hammer of pistol far enough to clear the cylinder, then twirled the death-receptacle over a flattened palm, thus making sure the weapon was in good working order.

Even so quickly a score or more of time-servers were flocking about the victorious duelist, offering their congratulations and vowing that Saul Eden had their hearty good wishes from the word go!

Welcome enough all this was, for the gambler had his little weaknesses in common with all mankind.

He knew, too, that he had gained very little credit in the Rough House affair that same morning, once the citizens had taken time to sum the matter up, and this would help even credit once more.

Still, though plainly enjoying this little ovation, the Sport of Breakneck was keeping well upon the alert and caught sight of the Man from Hard Luck moving

his way, gun in hand and seemingly bent on business of greater importance than that of congratulating the victor.

"Don't bar the way, gentlemen," quickly commanded the gambler, his flush fading but otherwise showing no signs of fear or of reluctance to meet that coming.

"Oh, there's no especial rush, gentlemen," declared the Sport, either catching word or guessing the truth from that instinctive falling aside.

"You are looking for me, of course, Mr. Arlington?"

"And having found you, Mr. Eden, permit me to say a word or two," came the cool rejoinder as the Sport still advanced, but without making any warlike movement further than that of still bearing revolver drawn in hand.

"What is it you want?"

"To complete my duty, first of all, and that comes pretty much like this: The doctor pronounces my principal too seriously disabled to resume the fight where 'twas broken off."

"If you wish my sympathy—"

"I really wouldn't know what to do with it," frankly vowed the Hotspur, with just the hint of a smile upon his strong and comely visage.

"Then, what else are you after?"

"Are you satisfied with the manner in which we have conducted our end of this little affair, Mr. Eden?" asked the Sport in a tone of almost painful politeness.

"One moment, please," with a fair imitation of that bearing. "Did I understand you to say that Mr. Crossley was—dead?"

"No, please the fates!"

"Well, sir, then I'll answer your question as bluntly as 'twas put," deliberately spoke the Breakneck representative. "I am better satisfied with the conduct of your end than I am with my own!"

"Indeed! All of which means?"

"That I meant to lay your man out too cold for skinning, and feel like cursing myself for making so bad a botch of it all!" declared the man of cards, viciously.

"That's more the tone of a butcher than of a gentleman, but I'm not so awfully particular while among strangers, and so—I'll be only too happy to make believe I'm Arthur Crossley if you are still thirsty for gore, Mr. Eden."

Hotspur Hal spoke with bland politeness on the surface, but underneath it lay a stern emphasis which none who heard or saw could for an instant doubt.

A bit of a flush crept into the gambler's naturally pale face, but like a man who has marked out a line of action from which he cannot be shaken, Saul Eden shook his head, then retorted:

"You're too kind for any sort of use, Mr. Arlington, but it's against my rule to eat more than one square meal at a time."

"But not to take water?"

"Then, too, I never fight a person of unknown pedigree," persisted the gambler, insolently. "Go gather up your best credentials, my pretty fellow. Submit them to any reputable citizens and secure their endoresement, then call again."

"In which particular hole would I find you, pray? Are you as much of a water-rat as your side-pardner, Rough House?"

"Who I am, what I am, is a matter of record, and no low sneers of yours can affect that record," retorted Eden. "The point in question is whether or no you are entitled to recognition at the hands of an honorable gentleman. Am I right, men of Breakneck?"

A prompt chorus declared his point was well taken, but Hotspur Hal was in nowise abashed, and quickly came again with a verbal shaft.

"All right, Mr. Eden, and while you are wondering what I am, just let me give you a gentle hint as to what I am not—neither road-agent nor sneak-thief, although I have no conscientious scruples

against fighting both rolled into one. So—please remember that I am ready for a fight to the finish whenever you are."

Again Bummer Billy forged to the front just when a relief was a boon to be thankful for, giving a husky war-whoop and wildly gesticulating with both arms as he issued his latest manifesto.

"An' hyar I be, Bummer Billy Bedad, the 'riginal dry man from parch-throat! The fust gent as ever won the ge-lorious title of Bummer from Atlanta to the sea—and so forth! The 'ventor of seventeen dif'rent ways o' gittin' stone blind drunk on next to nothin' when more wasn't to be hed! An'—hear me, ye pizen-hysters, all!"

"Right hyar I be, Bummer Billy Bedad, cocked an' primed an' more'n ready fer to fight ary galoot in this sweet-scented crowd—at my own game, that is!"

"At your own game? And that is—bluff and bluster!"

"Augh!" in a tone of utter disgust, then swelling front to give greater effect to the climax, he added: "Keg of good whisky on tap in the middle, with gobs o' free lunch on the side! Who kin—"

A burst of laughter at this ridiculous capsheaf to the more earnest challenges which had been flying back and forth so freely, helped to cover the retreat of Saul Eden, and once more the Hotspur from Hard Luck was cheated out of his friendly fight!

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOTSPUR HAL OFFERS HIS SERVICES.

While this well-intentioned effort to play even was going on, Dr. Green was busied with the luckless duelist, laying bare that broad breast the better to learn just how seriously Arthur Crossley had been wounded.

Roger Dikeman, face plainly betraying his deep anxiety, acted as volunteer assistant, and it was in answer to his imploring eyes that the man of medicine spoke, after a bit.

"It's a bad injury, but not necessarily fatal, my dear sir. The lead has passed clear through, which is one point in his favor, while his natural constitution is of the best."

"I'm all right!" huskily muttered the foreman, striving again to regain his feet. "My gun—I can—that devil shall never—"

Kindly hands held him powerless. No great feat, thanks to the benumbing effects of that unfortunate shot, not yet worn off.

"Much will depend upon the care and nursing, of course," added the doctor, and if this was meant for a hint, 'twas swiftly acted upon.

"Nothing shall be lacking, either, doctor," assured the mine owner. "At my house—he can be removed, you think?"

"He must be, and the sooner the better."

By this time Hotspur Hal was at liberty to serve, thanks to the more or less orderly retreat of his especial game, Saul Eden, and with a hustler of his caliber to superintend, arrangements were quickly made.

At the same time a hint let fall on the side gave Roger Dikeman his cue, and the mine owner spoke up at once:

"I'll go ahead and arrange for his reception, doctor. Come as soon as you can, but—above all else—think of the poor boy first!"

Aided by Billy Bedad, Hotspur Hal quickly improvised a fairly comfortable litter upon which the wounded duelist was placed with care, and then the little procession moved away in the direction of the Dikeman residence, there being no lack of volunteer bearers.

The journey was safely made, and Arthur Crossley bore the ordeal fully as well as the doctor could have expected, but 'twas a vastly different return from the one imagined by the 'luckless foreman.

That was a bitter point, indeed, and the poor fellow seemed to feel his defeat by one so fiercely hated, even more keenly than he did the wound itself, severe though that apparently was.

The shock must have been a severe one for Phyllis, but the girl showed true metal, bearing up bravely when the critical test came, and forcing a smile for her lover's eyes rather than bedewing him with tears.

The Hard Luck Sport was particularly impressed by this show of feminine nerve, and after the injured man was put in bed, and his wound given more careful attention, Dr. Green declaring that his condition was even more favorable than he had at first dared believe, the Sport from Hard Luck took a turn at cheering the despondent duelist.

"Of course it cuts deep to be bested by a cur of that breed, pardner, but one trick isn't a whole game, and the next one will all the more surely come your way.

"And then, if you look at it in the best light, why, man dear, you are to be congratulated and envied rather than not!"

Crossley groaned moodily, for his horizon seemed anything rather than rose-tinted just then.

"Laid up in elegant quarters, with the best the land provides, and a blue-eyed angel to play nurse. I'd take a blue pill on the same conditions, and give a he-old thank-you-ma'am into the bargain!"

Having done what he could here, after this fashion, Hotspur Hal would have beaten a retreat through fear of intruding on good nature, but Roger Dikeman in lowered tones begged the Sport to await his coming in the little office below stairs.

Here Arlington spent the next half-hour or so, smoking a cigar and reviewing the recent incidents which had assumed such a powerful interest for him since that first meeting with Arthur Crossley out in the hills to the north of Breakneck.

And here the mine owner found him when, after seeing Crossley drop off into a doze, mainly through weakness from loss of blood.

So much he stated in answer to the question put him by the Sport from Hard Luck, then adding:

"Dr. Green prefers to watch with him for a while, although he declares that he is very much pleased with the prospect, so far."

"He'll pull through, of course?"

"No doubt about that, unless blood-poisoning should set in. And that is hardly probable, thanks to Arthur's good blood and clean life."

"He's white, clean white, or I never saw one of the breed," heartily declared the Hotspur.

"Indeed he is, sir! And—I can illy spare him just now!"

These words came as though involuntarily, born of a despondency and degree of uneasiness which plainly wore sadly upon the mine owner.

Although the whole story had not yet been told within his hearing, Arlington had seen and heard sufficient to give a tolerably accurate guess at the situation, and having already reached a determination, made no bones about coming to the point.

"Without trying just that way, Mr. Dikeman, I've learned considerable about the way matters are shaping, and so—if I can be of any service to you while Crossley is laid up in lavender, command me, please."

Roger Dikeman flushed a bit, then turned pale as before. He seemed rather at a loss for words, but presently they came, hesitatingly:

"Of course, I'm grateful for the kind offer, sir, but I really don't—I can't see just how you can be of material service."

"Well, since Crossley is out of the ring for a week or more, you surely ought to have some one to do the rough work. And, if I do say it myself, you might

pick up a worse fellow than my mother's son. So, once more, if I can aid you in any manner, I'll gladly chip in."

"I don't see how you can," still hesitating. "It's a vile conspiracy against me and mine from start to finish! I believe—I have good reasons for believing it all a devilish scheme to freeze me out of the Touchstone property; the cream of all my holdings, too!"

"As how?" coolly asked the Sport from Hard Luck.

Arlington seemed to take it for granted that no further doubt could be entertained as to himself, his record, or his honor.

To give him the full credit due, he was tensely in earnest, and would balk at nothing by means of which he could thoroughly discomfit Saul Eden and that worthy's satellites.

Dikeman gave a nervous start and shiver, but still seemed afraid to bestow implicit trust and confidence on this off-hand stranger.

Hotspur Hal was shrewd enough to read all this aright, but if anything it strengthened his desire to come in on the ground floor.

A thoroughly fearless, steel-nerved and cool-witted man of action himself, he felt that Roger Dikeman, granting him all credit due, was not the right man to play the leading hand against an adversary like Saul Eden, where the stakes ran so desperately high.

For these reasons he showed himself more persistent than otherwise would have suited his taste; and now, leaning a bit nearer the mine owner, Arlington spoke in earnest tones:

"I don't want to crowd you against your will, Mr. Dikeman, and I wouldn't open my head again, only for one thing. I like Arthur Crossley. I never saw him, never even heard his name mentioned before last night. But I like him down to the ground!"

"He's a good lad: good lad and true!" muttered the mining magnate. "He has acted as my general foreman and representative for so long that I feel completely lost without him. He has been my right hand, and now—I'll miss him, dreadfully!"

"A good right hand, too, or I miss my guess," cordially declared the Hard Luck representative.

"So good that I can hardly expect to replace him, and so—His being so seriously disabled just at this time leaves me with hardly a hope to cling fast by," despondently muttered Mr. Dikeman, head drooping and fingers nervously interlacing the while.

Hotspur Hal saw his chance and instantly caught at it, speaking in frankly earnest tones:

"Of course I realize that I can't exactly fill his shoes, Mr. Dikeman, but if you will give me the chance I'll hold the place as best I know how until Crossley can get abroad once more."

"What? You surely can't mean—"

"But I surely do mean just that," declared the Sport with a smile and a nod as the mine owner broke off in sheer surprise. "Why not? I'm out of a regular job just now, and while I've had no practical experience in superintending a mining outfit, I've got grit to spare and plenty of what the Mexicans call *sabe*.

"Unless I'm widely mistaken in what has come my way since I first met up with Crossley last night, you want a man to take the front and hold things fairly level. I'm that man, and so—give me the position of foreman until Crossley can serve you again, Mr. Dikeman."

Not until now could the troubled old gentleman think this dashing stranger in good earnest, but now as eye met eye and mind touched mind, he read a goodly portion of the truth in those frank, honest, brave blue eyes, and all doubts and further hesitation fled forever.

He impulsively reached forth a hand, and as Hotspur Hal gripped it warmly, his host spoke in earnest tones:

"It's a bargain, no matter what your

terms of payment may be, sir! I feel that I can trust you, from start to finish!"

"Without bragging on myself, Mr. Dikeman, I'm safe in saying this much: of my own free will I'll never give you cause for regretting this confidence," declared the Man from Hard Luck.

"If I can't help, be sure I'll not hinder. But I sincerely believe that I can be of service to you; almost as much as Crossley might, only for this unfortunate injury."

"If you will, sir, and matters turn out anything like they should in common justice, I'll make this the most profitable employment you ever found," the mine owner assured.

"We'll talk about payment after I've rendered some service to deserve it. Now—the loss of this money hits you hard, don't it?"

"So hard that it means financial ruin—or even worse!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TOUCHSTONE AFFAIR.

This was but little worse than Hotspur Hal had imagined, so far as the mere statement of fact, but he hardly looked for so complete a breakdown on the part of his present host.

Roger Dikeman looked like one gifted with an iron will, and rather more than less the average nerve; but now he drooped as one utterly despondent, who feels that his last frail hope has ruthlessly been withdrawn.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have let nature take its course, knowing that time would fetch all things right; but with the inkling he had that day gained as to the undercurrent, Arlington felt that every hour lost was just so much to the enemy's benefit.

"Now, you're jumping right in the face of a pet motto of mine, Mr. Dikeman, and we surely can't afford to handicap our own game. You can't win if you don't play, and you can't play if you throw up the game in advance. So—take a brace and let's have a square look at our cards, just as an earnest."

At another time, and under almost any other conditions, Roger Dikeman would have resented such cool, almost patronizing talk; but just now he felt so sorely in need of aid and comfort that the Sport's off-hand chatter served as a tonic.

"What is it you wish me to do or to say, then?" he asked, lifting head and "taking a brace" by an evident effort of will-power.

"Post me as to just how the tangle came about. Give me a fair idea of the trouble, that I may best know how to apply the remedy," promptly answered the Man from Hard Luck.

A brief silence, during which Mr. Dikeman seemed trying to collect his thoughts, or trying to determine just how far he ought to trust this comparative stranger; then the mine owner complied.

He spoke of a valuable silver-bearing property called the Touchstone, the development of which had gone far toward building up Breakneck itself, but which, thanks to a most unfortunate combination of circumstances of late, had become almost too costly a possession.

For fully six months past the Touchstone record had been little more than one continuous string of accidents and mishaps, none of which were so serious as to ruin the mine totally, but, taken together, far more than ate up all profits besides draining heavily the pockets of its sole owner.

Hotspur Hal listened quietly to all this, permitting the mine owner to tell the story after his own fashion; but, now, as Roger Dikeman paused with another gloomy sigh, Arlington spoke, drily:

"Accidents are mighty easy to contrive, don't you know?"

"Yes, I know now, but until quite recently I never held a suspicion that anything worse than a streak of ill-luck was at work."

"And now?"

"I believe 'tis all a concerted scheme to get hold of my property, and the Touchstone in particular. I believe they are trying to freeze me out, but—I'd rather die!"

"While I'd rather turn the freezing mixture just the contrary way," declared the Sport from Hard Luck as an amendment. "That would be a change from the ordinary trick of making it hot for 'em, anyway."

Roger Dikeman smiled faintly as that mellow laugh came, and Hotspur felt fairly well content. Even so soon his cheery manner was having the desired effect, and his now-employer was beginning to brace up.

Mr. Dikeman went on to detail several of the annoying mishaps which had taken place of late, causing loss of time and the expenditure of no little money.

"And that has become unpleasantly scarce of late," he added, tones growing harder as they became stronger and steadier. "No matter what the security offered, cash seems to be fairly unattainable in this place, and as cash we had to have, we took the only other course open—tried to fetch it in from outside."

This was drawing closer the particular point in which Arlington felt an interest, but he made no remark, though his blue eyes caught a keen glint as of sunlight on polished steel.

"I tried it twice, the first time sending Crossley, as it seemed more convenient for him to leave town than for myself. Of course I know he did his level best, for—"

"It's a little way he has, I fancy," commented the Sport, with a nod of approval.

"No man living could have done better under the same conditions," declared Mr. Dikeman, like one who was only giving honor where credit was fairly due. "The stage was held up, all aboard being taken completely by surprise, and Crossley was robbed with the other passengers."

"That might condemn him in the estimation of a tenderfoot who never had the exquisite pleasure of hearing 'hands up,' coming over the muzzle of mighty business like guns," quoth Hotspur, with a wry grimace, "but I've been there myself!"

"And so have I," declared the mine owner, with a short, harsh laugh, which contained not even the suspicion of hilarity. "For the second venture along that line was my own, and—I lost it all!"

"Yet they say that lightning never strikes twice in the same place, and really expect us to believe it!"

"A bolt from the blue would hardly have hurt me worse," gloomily said the mine owner, brows contracted as he sat staring across the room with eyes that took no note of what they rested upon just then. "Each time the money was sorely needed, and each failure left me so much the worse off—well, ruin might better have come then than now!"

"Oh, we're miles away from that ugly station, my dear sir," cheerily declared the newly elected foreman of the Touchstone.

"If you knew—why not? I've said too much not to make a clean breast of it all, so here you have it, Mr. Arlington."

"With Arthur Crossley to back me up I tried every possible means of keeping my head above water, and at the same time hold on to my property. We kept the Touchstone working in spite of all accidents, but then, just when that double loss pinched me closest, the men employed there went out on strike, swearing that they would not work, nor permit others to take their places, until every dollar of back wages due them was paid in solid cash."

"And that you were not able to do, sir?"

"How could I?" with bitter emphasis. "Twice I had been robbed of large sums, and money had grown so scarce with me that I actually pinched here at home, in my household expenses, that I might

spare another dollar or two for the very scoundrels who now threaten to lynch me as a swindler and a fraud!"

"When you lost the cash coming from outside, why not make a raise right here? Surely your property would be ample security?"

The mine owner flushed hotly at this, quailing before that keen gaze for a bit, but rallying again to speak bitterly:

"I tried that, only to fail, most miserably! Crazy rumors were afloat to the effect that my title was no good; that I had no legal rights to the Touchstone Mine, in particular."

"Started by Saul Eden, for a pica-yune."

"I believe as much myself, now—but they are lies, all lies!" passionately declared the mining magnate, now fairly himself again.

"For which their author ought to pay fair penalty, too."

"He shall, if ever— But let me go on and get through with this part of it, please. These rumors were false, of course, yet they produced evil effects, and no matter to whom I turned, no loan could be placed, even though I offered to pay any price for the temporary accommodation."

"Which was almost in itself enough to button up a full pocket," drily commented the Sport from Hard Luck. "If you had put on frills— But, excuse me, please. My tongue gets away with me sometimes, you see!"

"No matter. Mistake or not, the end has come. And that end is—ruin, if not worse!"

"Unless you can secure the necessary cash, of course," amended Hotspur, coolly.

"Yes; but how can that be? My last chance was lost when the package of bills was stolen last night. If that had come safely to hand— But luck is dead against me!"

A brief silence, then the Sport quietly asked:

"What sort of a place is this Breakneck, anyway, Mr. Dikeman? In a sporting line, I mean. Can a man meet up with a fair game of poker?"

"I believe so," hesitatingly answered the mine owner. "I have heard some talk about heavy playing, but I never took much notice. Why?"

"One moment please. About how much cash would it take to tide you over this rift of hard luck? In round numbers, of course, with a liberal margin for incidentals?"

Though clearly puzzled as to what all this meant, Roger Dikeman took sober thought for a few moments, then replied:

"Ten thousand dollars would square all pressing debts. That would more than satisfy the miners, and all others who are pressing me hard; but what's the use in talking? It might as well be a million!"

"Oh, I don't know," easily said the Sport, leaning back in his seat as he added: "Play for a week's grace, boss, and I'll agree to furnish you with the ten thousand ducats."

"But—how?"

"Through plucking the tiger, of course. I always carry my luck with me, and in a lively town where the limit is taken off to suit—why, man, dear! 'Twill be just like picking up the yellow boys!"

Arlington spoke as though he held implicit faith in his ability, but Mr. Dikeman gave a gloomy, despondent shake of his head, then said:

"Doubtless you mean well, sir, but that will never work. Even if luck smiled upon you from the very start, that chance would be shut off at once, now you have allied yourself with my interests."

"Shut off? By whom, pray?"

"Saul Eden. He is king in Breakneck just now, and at a hint from his lips you couldn't place a dollar's bet even at long odds."

"Is that so? Well, then I'll have to plant the rascal for keeps!"

"You mean—just what?"

"That I'm half-white and free-born. No one man can shut off my fun or my sport, and as for Saul Eden—well, I wouldn't ask any better fun than to fit him out for a high lot on the hillside!"

CHAPTER XX.

A DECIDEDLY COOL PROPOSITION.

With all his airiness of speech and lightness of manner, there was something about the Sport from Hard Luck which seemed foreign to ordinary brag and bluster.

To hear without seeing, one might set him down as a true Gascon; but when eyes matched ears the result was very different.

Something of this was now realized by Roger Dikeman, and while his native sense of peace and goodwill to all mankind was shocked a bit, the cool speech certainly stirred up a spice of "Old Adam" in the bosom of the injured mine owner.

Until quite recently he had been wholly at a loss to account for that chain of costly accidents and mishaps, but now—almost past doubting the Breakneck gambler was at the bottom of the entire trouble!

Still, it is not so easy for one who has respected the law of peace and harmony for so many years to give his full approval to threats against human life, and Roger Dikeman had not yet found the right words when an interruption came in the shape of a sharp, peremptory rap at the front door.

"Shall I answer the call, boss?" asked Arlington, making a move to suit; but the mine owner shook his head negatively, himself leaving the home-office and passing through the hallway to the door.

As this swung open in obedience to his will, Mr. Dikeman gave a low exclamation of mingled surprise and indignation, for he stood face to face with—none other than Saul Eden himself!

A smile was upon the gambler's face, as though he felt assured of a cordial welcome, yet he took the precaution to slip a foot over the threshold, so that the door could not well be slammed in his face.

Mr. Dikeman frowned darkly as he quickly rallied from the surprise, and his tones were harshly forbidding as he spoke.

"Why are you here, Mr. Eden? You certainly can have no business with either me or mine."

"Beg pardon, my dear sir, but I have business with you, and that of pressing importance," coolly declared the gambler, at the same time pushing back the door which was beginning to close, stepped fairly inside the hall as he spoke.

"What manner of business—"

"Simply this: I can produce the original title deeds to the Touchstone Mine, and—"

"You lie! Or—stolen, then!" fiercely cried the mine owner.

For a moment or two it seemed as though the old gentleman would fling himself at the throat of the athletic gambler, but Saul Eden showed no fear, smiling as he stood just within the door, one hand silently pushing the barrier to place the while.

Possibly it was a thought for the wounded foreman above stairs, or, it may be, that insolent coolness produced the change; but be that as it may, Roger Dikeman passed abruptly from storm to calm, speaking sharply:

"State your business as briefly as possible, sir, then I will decide whether to kick you out-of-doors myself, or—go on, Mr. Eden!"

"All right. I hold the title deeds to the Touchstone Mine. It depends entirely upon you whether we settle amicably or otherwise," coolly announced the Breakneck Sport.

A brief silence, during which the two men stood eye to eye. Then Roger Dikeman spoke, with forced politeness:

"Will you kindly step back to my office, sir? Where so much appears to be

at stake, perhaps 'twould be as well to talk the matter over at our ease."

"That sounds a bit more like it," declared the gambler, with a nod of approval. "Walk in? Thanks: don't care if I do!"

Roger Dikeman waved a hand toward the other door, and the Sport slouched easily in that direction, crossing the threshold before he saw that the room was occupied.

Mr. Dikeman followed close upon the heels of his unwelcome visitor, almost pushing Eden on as the gambler stopped short at sight of the Man from Hard Luck, then quickly closing the door behind them both.

Although he must have felt somewhat akin to being trapped, the card-sharp betrayed no uneasiness in look or action, moving easily over to a chair, taking off his hat as he glanced from Sport to mine owner, then speaking in smooth tones:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Dikeman, but I expected to find you wholly at leisure. I came here on strictly private business, you understand?"

A slight inclination of his head toward the Sport pointed his meaning clearly, but Arlington made no move to abandon his position, smiling lazily as though he rather enjoyed the situation.

Possibly his employer took cue from that attitude, for he resumed the seat which he left to answer that knock at the door, quietly saying:

"Mr. Arlington is my friend and adviser, sir, and I have no business secrets from him whatever."

"Possibly I may have, though!"

"Then that business can have nothing whatever to do with me or my affairs, Mr. Eden," decisively answered the mine owner.

Although he could scarcely have anticipated just such a reception as this, the Sport of Breakneck was not one to remain long disconcerted, and with hardly a perceptible hesitation he dropped into a chair, tossing hat across to the little table, crossing legs in careless ease, then at once taking the verbal plunge.

"All right, if that plan suits your book, Mr. Dikeman. I can afford to meet you on the dead level, and so—business in a minute!"

"For a number of years you have figured before all the world as sole owner of the mining property listed as the Touchstone."

"I am the sole owner, sir, and no man living is better aware of that fact than Saul Eden himself," coldly cut in the mining magnate.

"Then, of course, you can produce the original deeds and bill of sale, all duly recorded as such valuable documents naturally would be?"

Maliciously the gambler spoke, seemingly heedless whether or no he precipitated a quarrel by his injudicious manner.

Roger Dikeman flushed hotly, then grew pale again before replying.

"My rights are well known throughout this section, sir, and those rights will be defended to the last gasp against all such infernal scoundrels as—supply the names for yourself, Mr. Eden!"

"It's hardly worth the trouble," retorted the gambler, as much the master of himself as he certainly appeared to be of the situation. "I will act in place of talking when the proper time comes. As for my proofs—well, what's the matter with this?"

He took a small slip of paper from an inner pocket, covered with close figures in pencil, smiling maliciously as he glanced it over before passing it across to Mr. Dikeman.

"You can sum up the total, I fancy, sir. And that merely represents the money I've paid out in a lump sum, buying up the claims of every man you owe for labor, material, or supplies at the Touchstone Mine."

Roger Dikeman glanced over those figures in silence for a few moments,

then crumpled the paper in his hand, to toss away as in contempt.

"That's all right, sir," declared the gambler, with curling lip as his eyes followed that flying ball, then came back to the face of his antagonist. "I merely made the memorandum for your inspection in case you were in doubt as to just how deeply the Touchstone had run you in debt this last year. Pretty snug total, don't you think?"

"What business is it of yours how much I may owe my men?"

"Beg pardon, dear sir, but you don't owe the men a single dollar," coolly declared the gambler.

"What do you mean by that?" harshly demanded Dikeman.

"Which goes to prove how little attention you have been paying to my words, dear sir. I told you once, but I can easily repeat: I have made it a point to buy up every individual claim against you on account of the Touchstone. The sum I paid in hard cash was marked down on yonder scrap of paper."

"This makes me your sole creditor, so far as that particular mine is concerned, and now—whether or no I demand immediate repayment depends entirely on how my proposal—"

"Careful, you villain!" harshly warned the mine owner, instinctively divining what was next to come.

"All right, sir," said the Sport of Breakneck, all trace of levity vanishing as by magic, tones growing harder and more metallic. "I didn't go into this little deal with my eyes closed. I came here fully prepared to meet any and all consequences, whether I found you alone or surrounded by armed guards."

"Meaning my gentle self, is it?" drawlingly asked the Sport from Hard Luck, gazing at the gambler from half-closed eyes.

"If the cap fits, wear it! But I'm talking to you, Mr. Dikeman."

"Go on, then, but bear my warning in mind—careful of your speech."

"I shall say what brought me here, but in naming one who is dear to not only yourself, sir, I will do so with all imaginable respect. Whether you approve of it or not, you can't help the fact that I passionately adore your daughter, Miss Phyllis."

"Careful, Saul Eden!"

"Hear me to an end, then I'll take whatever consequences may be my due," sternly interposed the gambler, speaking on in swift, earnest tones, as the mine owner gave way to his impetuosity.

"I love your daughter, Roger Dikeman, and my dearest hope in life is to win and wear her as a wife! I know you think I'm not worthy so high an honor—"

"Only a fool or a knave could think otherwise!"

"But I have something which may serve as make-weight, and so I say: give me your daughter Phyllis as a wife, Roger Dikeman, and I will that same hour turn over to you the original title deeds to the Touchstone Mine, and with them a receipt in full for all the debts I have paid."

"If you refuse, then I swear to you that I'll show you no mercy from this time on, but crush you so utterly that you can never rally far enough to—but enough! Will you accept my terms, Roger Dikeman?"

Before the mine owner could make reply, even if he had one in readiness, there came a startling interruption, a loud cry from the second story, almost certainly from the chamber in which lay Arthur Crossley.

CHAPTER XXI.

PUTTING ON A BOLD FRONT.

Blending with that cry was the sound of splintering glass, and feeling that something surely was going wrong in that quarter, Roger Dikeman sprang from his chair and hurried to the door, giving an inarticulate cry as he did so.

None the less prompt to act was Hotspur Hal, for his hand was the one to open the door through which the mine owner hurried, and his the hand which swung back the barrier an instant later.

Saul Eden was likewise upon his feet and heading that way, face flushing hotly as his keen ears caught an additional sound from the upper regions—the half-smothered scream of a woman in fright or amazement—but that athletic figure barred the way, and the Sport from Hard Luck curtly spoke:

"Don't be in such a mighty rush, pardner."

"Didn't you hear—there's mischief afoot, confound you!"

"So much the more reason for playing you didn't," coolly retorted the newly-elected foreman of the Touchstone, still barring the way, and leaving the gambler absolutely helpless so far as quitting that room was concerned, unless he saw fit to use actual force to open a passage.

"She was calling—Phyllis!"

"So long as she wasn't calling you, where's the sense in chipping? Better take it easy, mister man, for this is a little matter not open to argument."

"You infernal—"

"Have you appointed an executor to wind up your material affairs, Mr. Eden?" almost blandly inquired the man from Hard Luck.

The card-sharp made an impatient gesture, but angry though he assuredly was, Eden kept hands well away from his weapons.

"By what right do you attempt to keep me from leaving this room, sir?" he sternly demanded, only to have the smiling retort flung back:

"What's the matter with trying one of the windows if you must leave the room? That avenue is wide open, but this—excuse me!"

The Hotspur's tones were mild as those of a cooing dove, but under that thin disguise lay a positive menace which the Breakneck Sport was not yet ready to dare, fiercely though his hatred for this cool stranger was growing.

He hesitated like one who longs yet fears to invite an actual collision, listening the while for further alarm above. None such came, and then, with an air of one who feels the necessity for action has passed, Saul Eden gave a little show of teeth, at the same time drawing back toward his former position.

"This is hardly a place suitable for a bar-room squabble, sir, or I might treat you according to your merit. Later on—"

"You'll never lack for an excuse, I fancy," bluntly cut in the Hard Luck Sport, permitting prejudice to oust his native politeness for the time being.

"You'll know me better before long."

"Never well enough to make proud boast of that same acquaintance, anyway."

"Which means that you are dead-set on picking a row, is it?"

"I'll give you a big round dollar if you'll only tell me how that miracle can be performed," quickly cried the Sport with eyes glowing.

For a brief space it really seemed as though his point was carried, but then another failure was scored, thanks to the will-power of the gambler himself.

Bowing, Saul Eden backed to the chair he had vacated when the sounds came from above-stairs, coldly speaking as he seated himself:

"One thing at a time, as I told you before, Mr. Arlington. Wait until I've got my hands fairly clear of far more important business, then I'll make you eat dirt of croak: I swear it!"

"And so swearing, take oath to a lie," blandly declared the Hotspur as he, too, came back to a seat, yet still playing guardian to yonder door.

After that silence reigned in the home-office, the two men facing each other, in affected coolness, but with eyes which told a far straighter story.

Neither stirred when the sound of footsteps was heard on the stairs, coming

their way, for they both recognized the author, and were quite ready to see the mine owner as the door opened again.

That something out of the ordinary had transpired neither Sport could doubt for a moment. While striving to school his features, Roger Dikeman could not entirely succeed; but no word of his gave hint or clew as to the real cause for that upstairs alarm.

Saying nothing until he had crossed the room to take his former seat, Mr. Dikeman then cleared his throat to address the gambler.

"We might as well reach a definite conclusion now as later on, Mr. Eden, so— you say you have been buying up claims against me?"

"I have, yes," curtly admitted the gambler. "As I told you—"

"Wait, please. I prefer to proceed in order. The sum total of your investments in this line amounts to—how much?"

"I gave you the figures only a short time ago. Call it ten thousand dollars in round figures."

"Which no doubt could be materially scaled down by a fair examination, but let those figures stand for just now," coldly observed the mine owner, showing a far different personage than he had been before that hasty trip upstairs.

This transformation was no less a puzzle to Hotspur Hal than it surely was to Saul Eden.

Then Roger Dikeman seemed broken in spirit and irresolute of will, easy to sway by friend or enemy, but now: his face was flushed as with a consciousness of power, while his eyes sparkled and glowed, full of nerve and energy.

Before saying more, Mr. Dikeman left his chair to pick up and smooth out the bit of paper handed him by the gambler some minutes earlier, and with this in hand he spoke on:

"I'll keep this memorandum and compare it with my books, Mr. Eden. If there is not too great a discrepancy between the two, I'll settle your claims in short order."

This was scarcely what the speculator was expecting, and even now he could not accept that cold statement as other than a barefaced bluff on the part of his adversary.

"Do you mean that you will pay off my claims, Mr. Dikeman?" he asked with forced composure, lip curling with thinly masked scorn.

"To the last red cent: yes!"

"How and when?"

With insolent bluntness came the demand, for Saul Eden was taken fairly aback by this complete change of tactics.

Hotspur Hal gave an audible sniff of disgust at this lack of ceremony, but Roger Dikeman apparently felt that he could afford to overlook such a trifle, and without the least show of resentment made reply:

"To-morrow, at noon, and in cold cash, dollar for dollar. Have you any objections to offer, Mr. Eden?"

"To-morrow—in cash?" echoed the half-bewildered gambler.

"Precisely, sir. The cash shall be waiting here for you if you care to call for it, duly prepared to resign all real or imaginary claims to the Touchstone or other mining properties which I own and control. I put it thus plainly so that there may be no room left for dispute as to terms or conditions."

Saul Eden brushed a hand quickly over his face like one who needs to clear vision or wits, then again demanded:

"Do you really mean this, sir? Are you in earnest, now?"

Roger Dikeman inclined his head stiffly, as he made answer:

"I never indulge in jesting save with my equals and my friends, Mr. Eden. Shall I repeat? The money will be here to meet your utmost demands to-morrow at noon. If you care to call for it, well and good."

"If not?"

"If not, you will be looked up by myself or my duly accredited agent, and payment in full be publicly tendered you. If you are a wise man, sir, you will have your accounts straight and receipt ready at that hour."

Hotspur Hal lounged easily in his chair plainly enjoying the situation which had taken so sudden and complete a change.

This was his first view of Roger Dikeman as his natural self, and while thoroughly puzzled to account for such a radical change, it suited him far better.

None the less keen was his enjoyment because Saul Eden clearly found that change a nauseous dose to swallow, for with all his heart and soul Arlington had come to hate this card-sharp of Breakneck.

"It shall be as you prefer, Mr. Dikeman," yielded the gambler, after a brief silence during which he seemed rallying his nerve. "Although you refuse to recognize that fact right now, my real object through all is to aid a worthy gentleman in distress—"

"We will not argue the matter further of you please, Mr. Eden."

"You must permit me to say this much, sir: I love your daughter Phyllis, and if you will consent to my suit—"

Roger Dikeman rose abruptly from his chair, shaking a hand in stern repression as he spoke, coldly, yet fiercely:

"Enough—more than enough, Saul Eden! Keep your foul tongue from the name of my daughter. Give my consent to your—pah!" in tones of utter disgust. "The bare idea is an insult too foul for credence!"

"Hear me through, sir, or else—"

"Enough, I tell you, Saul Eden! Mention that name again, and old as I am, feeble as I may appear to your arrogance, I'll kick you out of my house like the veriest whiffet that ever made night hideous with its nasty yelpings!"

Thoroughly aroused, the mine owner really looked as though he would make the attempt, regardless of consequences, and Hotspur Hal, glorying in the old gentleman's spunk, clapped hands briskly in applause.

Unusually pale, the gambler flashed hot glances from man to man as he stood at bay, then harshly cried out in menacing tones:

"All right, Mr. Dikeman! If not paid in full by noon to-morrow, I'll take full possession of the Touchstone by force of arms, and—you can easily guess the rest of it!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A MYSTERIOUS RESTITUTION.

Like one who fears to linger longer where sore temptation assails, Saul Eden clapped hat on head and strode across the room, opening the door with a vicious jerk, then striding through the hall without waiting for guidance or even escort.

He left the building with a most emphatic "wooden damn," but with the clear, mocking laughter of the Hard Luck Sport ringing in his ears.

Hotspur Hal turned toward his employer with both hands outstretched in congratulation, heartily crying:

"Good—glorious! You took the wind clear out of his sails, and even if it was a bluff, I'll say the same: 'twas just red-hot stuff!"

Mr. Dikeman yielded hands to that hearty grasp, but his face was turned upward, where Phyllis stood at the head of the stairs wearing an anxious expression as she called out, softly:

"Father—dear father!"

"It's all right, girly!" answered the mine owner, his own face now fairly wreathed with smiles. "Tell Arthur it's all right, Phyllis."

The maiden gave a joyous gesture, hands clasping like one in prayer of praise as she swiftly turned to flee back to the bedside of her wounded lover.

And then the old gentleman returned the Sport's grip, laughing in silent glee

such as had long been a stranger to his face or his heart.

"A good effort at bluffing, was it, eh?"

"As good as the best, and if anything a little better," declared the Man from Hard Luck, still performing the pump-handle act with a will. "You turned the fine gentleman down like a mice, and—I say, boss!"

"Well?"

"Don't you worry about the rest of it, now. We'll make your bluff good, by crook if not by hook. Saul Eden won't crowd you in too big a hurry to-morrow: don't you think it, now!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Arlington?"

"Well, I'll tell you," frankly answered the Sport, in the most matter-of-fact tones imaginable, releasing one hand with which to lightly tap breast with forefinger to mark his successive points.

"With a sufficient motive to egg a fellow on, it'll be no difficult matter to pick a quarrel with a hot-head like our mutual friend, Saul Eden. I'll do just that, and then 'twill be comparatively easy to pluck the full amount needed from off the green cloth before Saul's heirs or executors can fairly get around to it again. See?"

With all imaginable confidence the Hotspur made his explanation, and one to hear him would fancy 'twas good as accomplished.

Mr. Dikeman heard him through, a half-quizzical smile wrinkling the corners of his mouth as he gravely asked, a bit later:

"And you would really do all this? For me, until this very morning an entire stranger to you, Mr. Arlington?"

"Why not? Laying apart all else, there'd be fun enough in the doing to repay all trouble, double times over. And—well, sir, since you try to corner me, why not? I like you. I like your daughter. And I more than like Arthur Crossley. Isn't that sufficient, when all bunched?"

Roger Dikeman nodded, then led the way back to the home-office, shutting the door behind himself as they both passed through.

Then he slipped a flat package from under his coat and handed it to the Sport, speaking in slightly unsteady tones:

"Will you look over what this contains, please, my good friend? It is—what do you think of that, anyway?"

His voice rose in triumph, turning to a heartfelt chuckle as Hotspur Hal gave a low cry of surprise.

For that package consisted of bank-notes, corners bearing large figures, the whole totting up a more than neat sum.

With deft fingertips Arlington ruffled the smooth ends, noting the important fact that while no bill was for less than one hundred dollars, the large majority of them called for just five times that amount.

"Fifteen thousand dollars!" he called out, after a bit, lifting puzzled eyes to meet the now joyous face of the mine owner.

"The precise amount which Arthur Crossley reported as stolen from him last night, by the way," laughingly reminded Dikeman.

"And you mean to say—where in thunder did it come from, anyway?" fairly exploded the thoroughly mystified Sport. "It was stolen, for Crossley never lied that badly, I can swear!"

Roger Dikeman grasped a hand and shook it warmly, tossing the package of money on the little table for the time being.

"I'll tell you all I know about it, Arlington, but first I want to thank you, not only for what you have already done, but for what you were willing to do as well!"

"Well, now, I will be—jiggered!"

Hotspur couldn't take eyes from that mysteriously restored money as yet, and his was an unresponsive hand in that warm clasp, just then.

"Did you really mean all you said, a bit ago?" asked Mr. Dikeman, gripping

fingers so tightly as to draw attention his way in spite of the fascination exercised by that money. "You really intended to pick a quarrel with Eden and—kill him?"

"Why not?" almost innocently queried the Sport, brows arching. "A fellow like that isn't fit to be let curse the footstool. And, besides, I reckoned 'twas either him or yourself. So—of course!"

A little less glibly than was his wont, but the face of the old gentleman was so full of mingled wonder and gratitude, his grasp so ardent, that in spite of his native coldness the man from Hard Luck felt just a trifle abashed.

"I can say thank you, Mr. Arlington, but that is poor pay for such extraordinary friendship. Some day I may be better able to express just what I am feeling now, and until then—"

"We'll say nothing more about it, please. And—well, I'll be—jiggered!"

Again his curious gaze reverted to that package of money, and Mr. Dikeman wasted no further time in explaining the mystery, so far as he himself was in the secret.

That was but partially, however, and when he told all he himself knew, the puzzle was even more complete than before.

"You heard the noise upstairs, of course? Well, that was caused in part by the coming of this package of bills. Some person threw them in at one of the windows, breaking the glass by means of a stone tied to the bundle. It fell squarely upon the bed where Arthur is lying, frightening him into giving a yell."

"Through the window? From outside, then?"

"Of course. And Phyllis, who was watching beside Arthur, likewise cried out, as no doubt you heard down here?"

"Yes. And—go on, please!"

"That's about all of it. When I ran up there, neither of them knew just what the package contained, nor did I stop to examine it then. I saw the broken window, and sprung there at once, but failed to sight any person on the outside. And then—this!" taking up the package and fluttering those crisp ends with loving touch.

Not that Roger Dikeman was such a worshipper of money, as such, but in this small compass he saw restored credit and preserved honor.

On his part, Hotspur Hal was frowning blackly, thumb and forefinger nervously pinching lower lip as he stared at the banknotes.

"What solution can you offer, Arlington?" asked Mr. Dikeman, next.

"It gets me—gets me bad!" frankly admitted the Sport, shaking head and drawing a long breath. "Until right now I could almost have taken my Bible oath that Saul Eden was head and front of that road-agent outfit, and that to his cunning trickery you owed all your monetary losses."

"And now?"

"I'm wholly at sea," was the frank admission. "The only thing I can think of is this: has an ally of his played him false? Hardly! For if he was one fit to enlist in such a deal he'd never throw away a neat little fortune like this!"

"Then, whom could it possibly be?" asked the mine owner, growing serious if not actually troubled by that mysterious affair.

"You tell, for I don't know how!"

Just then a swift, light footfall was heard and a soft tapping came at the door, which opened a moment later to reveal the fair face of Phyllis, who spoke to her father:

"Excuse me, please, but Arthur wishes very much to see you, papa."

Swift to take a hint, Hotspur Hal caught up his hat and said:

"Don't let me detain you, sir. I want to take a bit of a walk, anyway. I'll see you in the morning, if not before. Until then, good luck to all beneath this roof tree!"

The Sport from Hard Luck beat a hurried retreat, seemingly more afraid of Phyllis' smiles than of an enemy's frowns, but when once without the building his nerve returned, and he was himself again.

When scarcely clear of the grounds a low-pitched, quavering whistle caught the keen ear of the Sport, and, turning eyes swiftly in that direction, Arlington beheld the hardly reputable-looking comrade to whom the out-door department had been assigned.

For the past few minutes the very existence of Bummer Billy had passed from the mind of the sport, but now a vivid gleam shot into those big blue eyes as he wondered:

"Where was Billy when the thing happened? Could he have—"

Where both parties are in motion and each one is eager to join the other, a junction is readily effected, as a rule. So it was on this occasion, and even before Arlington could shape a query to suit his wonder was answered, in part at least.

"That's the durndest kind o' funny work g'wine on round these yer diggin's I ever did see or hear tell on!" declared Bummer Billy.

"What do you mean? What sort of funny work, Billy?"

"Waal, I seed a feller smashin' glass over yonder, an'—"

"Who was it? Where is he? Out with it, man alive!"

"Durned ef I know," hesitatingly answered the tramp, drawing back as the sport betrayed such powerful interest. "Jest ketched a glimpse o' the critter, an' then he lit out in a holy hurry. Why ye so red-hot?"

"Why? Oh, I just wanted to make him pay for a new pane of glass; that's all," declared Hotspur, with admirably feigned carelessness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HINT FROM KNAVE TO RASCAL.

Saul Eden effected his retreat from that uneven contest with only fair grace, but many another man under similar circumstances would have come off with far less glory.

The fact that none of his allies, his henchmen, his especial tools, were witnesses to that retreat with none of the honors he had so confidently expected to capture, in a measure lessened the bitterness; but there was precious little of brotherly love glowing in heart or bosom as the Breakneck gambler strode swiftly on his way.

What had happened to work such an amazing alteration in Roger Dikeman? Was it but the desperation of a man who feels that all is lost, or could it be possible that—

"He's got the cold cash, but how? Could Crossley have run it in this morning, when— Oh, Satan scorch the whole infernal crowd, but—all save Phyllis, my beauty!"

By this time those swift strides had carried the gambler to the footbridge from the further end of which he had so deftly "dumped" the beast in defense of beauty, and as though this carried his thoughts back to Rough House, he at once made for the refuge which that disreputable trickster had found after his escape from river and from hooting host.

That snug cover belonged to the gambler in person, and consisted of a building in town which had come Eden's way across the poker table. As the best use to be made of it for the time being, Saul fitted it up as bachelor's quarters, to which none save his most intimate and trustworthy friends were ever admitted.

Unless this was an exception to the rule, for 'twas the ugly bloated face of Rough House which turned that way as the key turned and door opened, an expression close akin to that a sorely hunted wild beast might wear finding birth the while.

"Oh, you is it? I thought—devil burn the luck, anyway!"

Saul Eden muttered something which could scarcely have been a blessing as he closed and secured the door behind himself. Rough House shrunk away, almost cowering as those glittering eyes fixed upon his pimply face.

The gambler did not speak in haste, and after a bit just the hint of a smile crept into his really handsome face. He took a chair near the little round table which stood in the center of the room, bearing upon its surface cigars, glasses, and a partly filled decanter of whisky.

Lighting a weed and taking a fair drink of the liquid damnation, Eden planted both elbows on the table, chin on hands and fingers half-spanning his head as he sat staring steadily at his guest.

For several minutes Rough House bore this silent inquisition with forced quietude, but then he began to squirm in his chair, finally bursting forth with the husky words:

"Oh, durn it all! Won't you ever let up on that, Eden?"

"I was just thinking—only just thinking."

"Thinking of what?"

"Wondering how much manhood bad whisky had left in your carcass, Rough. Thinking what a pity you couldn't—are you a dead duck, old man?"

House made a wry grimace as one might who rather more than suspects a nauseous pill in store, and then gruffly broke forth with:

"Dead duck or live chicken, that's jest this much about it, Saul Eden: you hain't g'wine ter to ketch me into no more durn fool tricks like that one: no ye don't, now!"

The gambler made a swift gesture, scowling blackly like one who feels an insult in that mere mention, then spoke more to the point.

"I've been out to see old Dikeman, and tried to put on the screws as I told you I would."

"And he begged off, of course? Curses cover him from top to toe!"

"I only wish he had tried it that way!" one clenched hand coming down to smite that table-top with vicious emphasis. "But he didn't. Instead—what do you reckon, Rough?"

"Spit it out, can't you?"

"I'd rather spit out a snake, but it's truth. He said that I might call tomorrow noon for the money, and—"

"What?"

"That's it, all the same. He swore I should have dollar for dollar to the very last claim, and—he meant just what he said, too!"

Rough House sat staring into the pale face of his gambler pard as one might who found it wholly impossible to believe what his ears drank in. At any other time that picture of stupid amazement might have tickled the gambler's sense of the ridiculous, but not now.

Saul Eden was too intensely worked up for any such idle thoughts.

"I've been trying ever since to make out just how and where he made the raise, but I can't! I know Crossley didn't have it in his clothes last night, and so—"

"It's a bluff: a cold bluff!" declared Rough House, emphasizing his belief with a sulphurous oath.

But again the gambler shook his head in negation, scowling afresh as brows wrinkled over that annoying problem.

"No. I was ready for that. Smart though the old devil surely is, he could never have fooled me along that line."

"Then you really reckon?" hesitated the ruffian.

"He's got the money, safe enough," positively yet reluctantly declared Eden. "I can't read it any other way, and I've tried it from every side and straight through the middle. He's got hold of the cash, and if he really offers to pay when noon comes to-morrow—do you know just what that means, Rough?"

"I'll b'lieve when I see, an' not afore!"

"It means that we're in a box, and in place of playing on pure velvet, we'll have to force the fighting ourselves. And

winning out isn't going to come nigh as easy as you look for, old man!"

Rough House reached forth a far from steady hand to grasp the neck of decanter, pouring forth a full glass, then downing the dose at a single gulp.

It was the action of one who feels his nerves trembling, and again the Sport of Breakneck gave an ominous scowl.

This was hardly the manner of tool he desired to pick up, but what better could he do on such short notice?

"You swore 'twas dead easy! You said we could win out slick as tumblin' off a barked log with head in a whirl!"

"And I meant just what I said, too. I'd have bet any odds that the old curse couldn't lay paws on one tenth of the cash necessary to pay off such heavy scores. And without that cash—even now 'twill be dead easy if he fails to come to time with the full amount."

"Waal, I still cain't make it come true, an' I'm bettin' it's all a measley bluff," doggedly muttered Rough House.

"I wish it might prove one, but I can't help thinking differently. Somehow that infernal Hotspur is at the bottom of it all—"

"Why don't you lay him out too cold fer botherin', then?"

"So I will, but not just now. I've other work on hand. As for you—look here, Rough?"

"Play, I'm lookin'. What is it?"

"I'll give you a little hint which you'll find mighty well worth acting upon, and that is just this: Yonder lies a snug little fortune for the bare picking up. And—you can hold fast to all you get, too!"

Saul Eden leaned further across the round table while speaking in lowered tones, and one must have been far more stupid than Rough House to mistake his full meaning. Yet the lesser knave stared blankly, his jaws slowly parting to say:

"How?"

"That's for you to say, pardner. 'Tis an easy crib to crack, as you surely know for yourself."

"But—whar d'you reckon he'd hide the stuff?"

"That's for you to find out, Rough. If you can't stumble on it in a hurry, what's the matter with pinching the old codger until he squeals to save himself from even worse?"

Rough House sat staring at vacancy for a minute or two, Eden making no effort toward hurrying the conclusion, feeling reasonably sure that his hint had fallen on fruitful ground.

Presently the rougher rascal gave a start and a long breath, meeting those dark eyes for a keen stare, then bluntly speaking:

"You'll lend a helpin' hand, of course, Eden?"

But the gambler drew back a bit, shaking his head negatively.

"No, but simply because I can't afford to take the risk."

"Yit you ax an' expect fer me to do it, don't ye?"

"That is widely different, old man. If Roger Dikeman should happen to be robbed this night, after what has passed between us, he'd think first of me, and would raise a holy old howl to that effect. So, you see, I've got to have a dead-sure alibi to present in case of any such accident as—you understand?"

"Waal, that'd be easy enough, wouldn't it? The boys 'd sw'ar to anything, an' make out black was white ef you was jest to give 'em a hint that way," persisted the duller-witted knave.

"Of course they would, but that very readiness works against any such idea," coolly declared the Breakneck Sport. "If this little trick is to be turned, I've got to have wholly reputable witnesses to back up my declaration of innocence."

"Durn p'tic'lar, 'pears to me!" mumbled Rough House.

"It stands me in hand to be mighty particular, just now. And so I say this much: I'll sit in a game with witnesses whose credit over Roger Dikeman can't

impugn, and that game shall last unto broad daylight to-morrow.

"If anything should happen during the night, nobody can safely say that black is the white of my eye, while you—well, if fifteen thousand dollars in clean cash isn't enough to cover the wear and tear of one night's work, I'll shut up shop!"

"Fifteen thousand dollars!" echoed Rough House, while Eden added:

"I've let fall the hint, now do as you deem best. If the cash is offered to-morrow, I'll have to take it. If not—the Touchstone is ours, and the rest are frozen out entirely!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT CAME OF THE HINT LET DROP.

Although that mysterious restitution of the stolen package of money could not fail to highly work up one and all of those beneath the Dikeman roof-tree, the intense relief felt by all when the future seemed so surely provided for, more than made amends for the rest.

In vain father, daughter, and lover tried to solve the puzzle, each one offering a solution which he or she was the first to declare untenable on second thought.

Up to that hour Arthur Crossley had believed Saul Eden the prime mover in all those audacious robberies. He felt fairly certain that the gambler had tried to rob and to slay him, that night last spent, failing at first, only to dog and finally succeed, in getting the package of money when dealing that foul stroke at the stable where his good horse had been put up for the remainder of that night.

But now—what?

Surely Saul Eden would never make restitution after this fashion? Surely he would never furnish so effective a weapon for use against his audacious scheme of half-legalized plunder?

Naturally one would expect all this excitement would work fresh injury to the wounded foreman, but the exact contrary proved to be the case, and Dr. Green expressed his glad surprise when he called again to see how his patient was rallying from the shock which follows a severe gunshot wound.

"Why, man, you're a fraud!" he declared, quite jovially. "I counted on running up a fine, large bill of costs, while here you are—keep on as you've begun, dear sir, and we'll have you out for an airing in less than a week!"

And so it came to pass that, as the evening wore on, Arthur Crossley declared himself sleepy, and then "kicked" emphatically against the idea of having a night-watch near his bedside.

"I wouldn't be able to sleep a wink," he affirmed, earnestly, when Roger Dikeman attempted to reason with the patient. "You're going to bed just as usual, or else—refuse, sir, and by all that's good I'll pick up my bed and walk—all the way over to the hotel!"

Of course this was a bit of exaggeration, yet Crossley spoke in fair earnest, so far as protesting against father or daughter losing their natural sleep on his account. And, after having a large bell placed close to his elbow, with water and other comfortables at hand so he could assist himself or summon aid in case of need, the wounded foreman was left alone for the remainder of that night.

Although he retired as usual, Roger Dikeman was at first too powerfully wrought up for easy sleeping.

Such complete ruin had been staring him in the face, rendered doubly sure by that latest loss of hardly gained cash, that this sense of wondrous relief banished slumber from his eyes for an hour or more after his accustomed time.

As for fair Phyllis, who shall say? Suffice it that, after bidding father and lover an affectionate good night, the maiden retired to her chamber, and outward peace reigned there as well.

Worn out by the loss of blood, in addition to the shock of the night, mainly

through deep anxiety on behalf of his employer, the foreman of the Touchstone Mine dropped off at an early hour, sleeping peacefully and soundly as a healthy babe.

Just how long that sleep lasted, Arthur Crossley never fairly realized, but the next thing of which he was conscious was starting up in bed, heart throbbing violently and veins all a-tingle, breath suspended while he listened "with all his ears."

What had so abruptly startled him from slumber? Why was he so positive that imminent peril menaced—whom?

Scarcely aware of what he was doing just then, Crossley flung back the coverlet and slipped out of bed, steadying himself for an instant as a sudden faintness swept across him, head and body.

Only for a moment, as it seemed. Then he rallied, grasping the loaded revolver which lay on the stand near the head of his bed, crossing the room to the door, opening this and stepping outside.

Here he paused to listen for a brief space, and—surely that was a sound which—ha!

Crossley looked from one chamber to the other, giving a quick gasp as he detected a faint light coming through key-hole and under the door of the room occupied at night by Roger Dikeman.

Like a revelation came the remembrance of that precious package, and lent fresh strength for the occasion, the young man hurried to that door, trying the knob, only to find the barrier fast.

Drawing back a bit, he turned his sound shoulder that way, rushing forward with a force which fairly burst the door open and brought himself up standing at the threshold.

He saw Roger Dikeman helplessly in the grip of masked men, one of whom whirled his way with a savage oath, firing as he turned, and just as Crossley himself began to pick trigger.

All this happened within the space which a single breath might cover, and then the oil-lamp was dashed to the floor and shattered, fortunately without explosion or taking fire; fierce curses rung out and one harsh yell was audible as a mad rush was made by the masked ruffians.

Crossley was shooting as rapidly as he knew how, but already natural faintness was overpowering him, and he went down as a child before that rush, although a well man might have tumbled before that ugly stroke from clubbed revolver as the masks plunged past.

The foreman did not recover his senses until at least an hour had rolled by, but then he found himself back in his own bed, watched over and cared for by father and daughter, neither of whom seemed so very much the worse for the past excitement.

For a minute or two Crossley seemed fairly dazed, but then he recognized his employer, and with that recognition came all the rest.

"The money—they didn't—"

With gentle force Roger Dikeman laid palm over those feverish lips, at the same time partially slipping that all-important package from his bosom to relieve that strong anxiety.

This action was far better than mere words, and Crossley gave a glad sigh as he recognized so much of the truth. Then his eyes asked a further question, which was as quickly answered.

"I'm not injured in the least, thanks to your brave action, dear boy," declared the mine owner, while Phyllis—

Her lips likewise gave thanks, but 'twas in lovers' coin, and never called for a spoken syllable.

Then, when Crossley was beginning to feel the effects of his recent wonderful experience in growing lassitude and physical weakness, his unstrung nerves received another bracer by the coming of Hotspur Hal and his trampish comrade, Billy Bedad.

Evidently they had seen the mine owner before, for Roger Dikeman betrayed

no surprise at their coming, and eagerly questioned them:

"Did you—what have you learned? Was any one hurt so badly that—all of it, please!"

The Sport from Hard Luck was bending over the injured foreman, his face lit up with a smile, but his big blue eyes full of an anxious light as they scanned that haggard face.

What he saw was clearly beyond his expectations, and there was a glad echo in his voice as he briefly congratulated his friend over the outcome of that night's adventure.

"You marked at least one of the rascals, pardner, and when daylight comes to help—well, now, we won't do a thing to mister burglar!"

"Then you have—who was it, do you think?" asked Dikeman.

Hotspur Hal shook his head, curtly.

"I can't say, as yet, but whoever 'twas was losing red paint in big leaks. We'll find it all out in the morning, but for now—just how did it all come about, anyway?"

Crossley likewise showed no little curiosity, and spoke in low tones as the mine owner glanced his way.

"Yes, please. You saw them? Who were they, sir?"

But now it was Mr. Dikeman's turn to shake his head, reluctantly.

"I must have been sleeping very soundly, for I can't recall a thing up to the moment I felt a strong hand at my throat and my eyes opened to see a man in mask bending over me as I lay in bed. He held a bared blade at my throat, and hoarsely threatened me with instant death—"

Phyllis gave an involuntary cry at this, bowing her head and hiding her face in the coverlet, while Arthur's sound arm stole gently about her shivering shoulders.

Thus warned against being too realistic, Mr. Dikeman cut his narrative short, briefly laying bare the simple facts: that he had been ordered to yield up the package of money under grim penalty, when just at the critical moment Arthur Crossley came to the rescue.

No, he hadn't recognized either of the ruffians, and all he knew was that they had been two in number. If more had engaged in the affair, he failed to sight them.

Having thus put his part of the night's adventure into the briefest possible speech, Roger Dikeman leaned forward to clasp Arthur's hand, again thanking him warmly for his brave conduct.

"You saved my life, for that is the facts of it all. I would never give up that money, and they would—my brave lad!"

"And we'll save the rascal for you, to pull hemp, too," declared Hotspur Hal, deeming it wisest to make a diversion just then. "That red trail ought to be easily followed up by daylight, and then—well, I reckon Breakneck won't kick against fair payment when fully due!"

Crossley gave a sigh and an impatient movement, as he seemed to feel his weakness afresh. Then he spoke, huskily:

"I wish I was only able to help! If I could still fill my office as foreman, perhaps we wouldn't—but I'm worthless, now!"

The Hard Luck Sport quickly spoke up at this, as he offered a hand:

"Let me step into your shoes until you can come back to fill them, pardner. Will you accept my services, Mr. Dikeman?"

"Do you really mean just that, sir? Then—your hand on the bargain!" cried the mine owner, and the two men clasped hands, warmly.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE QUEER PARDS AT THE TOUCHSTONE.
That bold attempt at burglary did not create much stir in Breakneck, for the simple reason that very few of the citizens were aware of the fact.

As the money was still safe, and they had lost nothing more than a few hours' sleep, the Dikemans saw no reason to publish their alarm; and as for the burglars themselves, they certainly had still less reasons for advertising their failure.

That all of Arthur Crossley's lead had not gone astray was clearly evidenced by the red trail left behind when that hurried flight was made; a trail easily to be read inside the house, although more difficult after the Dikeman premises were left.

True to his pledge, Hotspur Hal was on the keen alert with the earliest ray of coming dawn, and between them the queer pards lifted that gory spoor for some considerable distance.

Instead of leading directly for town, as might have been expected, this turned away without crossing the river by either foot, or road bridge, as though the injured knave belonged elsewhere than at Breakneck.

The morning sun was hardly in plain evidence when the pards came to what promised to be the end of their trail, so far as those red signs went: a spot among the foothills where that wound had been dressed, as bits of bloody rags bore ample evidence.

There was little to be gained through studying that place. The soil was too hard and dry for retaining footprints, and after satisfying themselves on this point, and failing to again hit off the crimson trail, the two comrades abandoned that hunt for the time being.

"It's still too early to report at Dikeman's," decided the Sport from Hard Luck, with glance from sun back to Bedad. "And I'd like a bit better news to carry when I go, too. So—let's ramble over toward the Touchstone, Billy."

"I hain't a-keerin', pardy. Whichever hits you is good a-plenty for a critter o' my size an' copperosity."

Although they had not attempted anything like a systematic exploration or examination, the pards had ere this taken a look in passing in the mining property in dispute, their curiosity whetted by the facts which had been let fall within their hearing since that first sensational meeting with Arthur Crossley.

This being the case, they had no difficulty in finding the mine that morning, slackening pace a bit as they drew near the rude buildings which marked the adit.

The fact of the hands all having struck work would account for the silence and utter lack of bustle in that vicinity, but after what Saul Eden had said concerning the matter in dispute, Hotspur Hal would not have been greatly surprised to find the property under an armed guard, too powerful for their backing down.

Instead of the stern warning at gun-muzzle which he fairly anticipated, the sport was permitted to draw within easy reach of that adit before seeing shape of human or hearing word of challenge; but then a tall, burly fellow came into sight, hand on butt of revolver, as he harshly called out:

"You want to pull out o' hyar, strangers, an' that in 'a holy hurry! They hain't no 'mittance for the likes o' you-all, an' so—git!"

A swift glance failed to reveal any armed backing to this walking obstacle, and fairly confident that the big fellow was arrogating to himself far greater authority than really belonged to his duty, Hotspur Hal made easy retort:

"Now, who's trying to trample all over your cornfield? Go a little easy, Roger Dikeman, or—"

"Who you callin' Roger Dikeman?"

"Why, that's your legal name, isn't it, dear fellow?" asked the sport, with well-simulated surprise in face and in tones.

"No it hain't, durn ye fer—"

"Bite it off, there! Not Roger Dikeman, eh? Then why in blazes are you trying to bluff gentlemen off property which certainly belongs to Roger Dikeman?"

Having fairly sprung his trap, Hotspur Hal cast suavity to the wind, right hand on butt of revolver as he moved toward the big fellow, looking decidedly warlike as he spoke.

The miner shrunk visibly, eyes flashing from one side to the other, loth to beat a retreat, yet hardly daring to further invite hostilities.

"And who may you be, anyway?" persisted the Hotspur, as he advanced. "You are not Roger Dikeman. You just as surely are not Arthur Crossley, the former superintendent; and I'm ready to make oath you're not the new foreman, unless I wds changed at nurse for a human—can you grunt, my overgrown specimen of the bristly race?"

"I kin—who'n 'ell 're you, anyway?" fiercely exploded the burly miner, divided between rage and prudence just then.

"Who am I? Well, for lack of a better title, just set me down as Hotspur Hal, from Hard Luck. As for my business, I'm here to look over the Touchstone as its recently nominated foreman and outdoor boss in general. Have you any objections to offer, my pretty fellow?"

"You hain't no right—you cain't go in while—that's a look-out, which it'll be your ternal death ef ye buck ag'inst it!"

"I want to know?" mildly cooed the sport, face as full of sunshine as the brightest day of summer. "And pray, who may have issued the edict to that effect?"

"The boys who sot me to keep watch, an' ef you don't—"

"That will do, Mr. Guardian," curtly interrupted the sport, having gleaned all the information he cared for from this particular quarter. "Now, suppose you take a walk. I am in charge of these premises, and I seriously object to your trespassing. I'm in no rush to set up a bone-yard of my own, but if you hang on too long—scat, Tommy!"

Where oath and bluster might have failed, this cool assurance proved thoroughly effective, and after a brief hesitation the burly fellow retreated, mumbling something which might have been, and probably was, a threat to play even ere long.

As soon as he had withdrawn fairly outside the limit of those too keen eyes, the miner turned and hurried off almost at a run, like one who has very pressing business in view.

"G'wine fer to fetch a gang, fer rocks!" commented Bummer Billy, who had quietly looked on through all this. "Mought 'a' saved a heap o' bother ef ye'd jest salivated him fust jump, pardy."

"And pulled hemp for so doing? No, I thank you, Billy!"

The tramp shrugged his shoulders at this, turning away toward the main entrance to the Touchstone Mine, but giving a bit of a cry as he stopped short when barely inside the mouth of the drift.

"What's biting you now, Billy?" asked Hotspur, coming his way.

"Who? Which? Me?" spluttered the bummer, giving a hasty pawing with first one foot and then its mate among the loose shale. "Oh, jest nothin' wuth talkin', but I reckon—"

"Red paint, is it, Billy?" drily asked the sport, as he came up, to at once note sundry suspicious signs there upon the dry stones.

"Critter was hev'n' the bloody nose when we come up, 'pears like," grumbled the tramp, moving on and setting well inside the drift before stopping to light the candle with which he had provided himself.

Hotspur apparently accepted this explanation, and the two pards for some little time inspected those workings, finding an abundance to interest them, if only through guessing at the true value of the property.

But Hotspur Hal seemed less powerfully interested in this particular quarter than was his odd pard, and presently, losing sight and sound of Bummer Billy,

Arlington turned to retrace his steps, pausing only when fairly at the mouth of that main drift.

Ever since entering the mine his thoughts had been turned toward that big fellow and his reasons for beating such a hurried retreat. And his suspicions as to a more than probable assault from the enemy seemed in a fair way to be confirmed as Hotspur reached the mouth of that tunnel once more.

He heard harsh voices even before he sighted their owners, and with a hasty glance at his weapons, the new foreman of the Touchstone, looking every inch a workman in the rough-and-ready garb which he had donned for the occasion, stepped into full view of that oncoming crowd, keenly scanning both number and faces.

Chief among them he took note of Saul Eden, and not far from his elbow the big fellow whom he had bluffed off so easily only a short time before.

As he saw that his coming was discovered, Hotspur Hal moved a bit forward, hand on pistol-butt, as he flung up his left by way of challenge.

"Go easy, gentlemen all! Possibly you may not be aware of the fact, but this is private property, and you are trespassing, contrary to law."

"Who the devil set you up as law and gospel?" harshly cried the Breakneck Sport, forging boldly to the front, evidently in no angelic humor.

"Satan had nothing whatever to do with it, so that lets you out, Mr. Saul Eden. If you have any particular business with the owner, Roger Dikeman—"

"I have just that, then!"

"Call on the gentleman at his place of residence, then," coolly said the sport, betraying no fear or uneasiness, although the gambler was still advancing.

Then the ugly grumblings which had been all along coming from the armed crowd at Eden's heels broke forth into audible words, some cursing the mine owner, but by far the majority howling for the wages out of which they had been cheated so long.

Hotspur Hal caught quickly at these calls, and made swift reply.

"Oh, what's biting you fellows? You have been paid in full for each and every dollar's worth of work you've put out upon the Touchstone."

"It's a lie!" fairly howled at least a dozen of the miners.

"Then Saul Eden is the liar, for he swore he'd paid you all off and—no ye don't, now!"

With a savage curse the gambler leaped forward to assault the Hotspur, hoping to catch Arlington wholly off his guard.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BUMMER BILLY'S BOLD BLUFF.

With all his seeming carelessness, Hotspur Hal was never in his life more wholly upon the alert than right now, and while seemingly with eyes and thoughts only for the miners, each movement made the gambler of Breakneck was noted by those keen eyes.

And so, when Saul Eden leaped viciously forward, the Sport from Hard Luck was more than ready for the test.

Stepping swiftly to one side, Arlington thrust forth a foot, at the same instant shooting out his left arm, that tightly-clenched fist going true as a die to its mark; catching the gambler between ear and chin as he tripped over that deft obstacle.

Like a man of straw Saul Eden was knocked endlong, hitting earth heavily and rolling down the slope, to fetch up amidst a clump of prickly bushes a dozen yards distant, completely knocked out of the ring for the time being.

Few men knew better how to judge a blow of this sort, hence the Hard Luck representative never gave his especial enemy another glance, but at once faced the excited miners, who were almost ready to follow the lead of the gambler in an assault which could have had but the one ending.

"Steady, all!" cried the sport, in clear, stern tones, as his hands filled each with a revolver, the muzzles of which swept to and fro along that irregular line, as the further warning followed:

"I don't want to hurt any one of you, gentlemen, and I'll not hurt you without it's fairly forced upon me by—steady, I say! Keep back, or by the blue heavens above our heads right now, I'll shoot—and shoot to kill!"

There was an involuntary recoil on their part, but Hotspur Hal was keen enough to realize that this was purely involuntary: just so, almost any force would have shrunk back on being so menaced; but the danger to himself was only checked, not removed.

He saw that big fellow slink away toward the tool-house, but could not waste further thoughts upon him. The miners still holding their ground were far more dangerous, and he knew that a single wrong word might fetch the crowd roaring upon him, thirsting for his life-blood.

"You were asking for your just dues, friends," he said, speaking in amicable tones, yet holding both himself and his guns in readiness for swift action in case of need. "And I told you the naked truth: Saul Eden swore he had bought up all your claims, paying you dollar for dollar, and then presenting a bill for the full amount to Roger Dikeman, who is—"

Just then the big fellow came back to view, yelling hoarsely and flourishing above his head a coil of rope, which he had found in the tool-house.

"Hyar's the medicine fer to cure a slip-sloppy tongue, pards!" he yelled, as he hurried back toward his comrades. "Durn all chin-music, but hang the cuss which wants to—hang him, boys!"

"Whooray fer Dick Simpson!"

"Big Dick's right: hang the infernal fraud who backs up a worse one! Hang him, then serve old Dikeman the same way!"

Hotspur Hal stood his ground bravely enough, but he knew that ugly work was coming, and felt how precious scant were his chances: one man against a round score of rough alleys like these!

"Steady, all!" rung forth his commanding tones, as his weapons once more came up in grim menace. "I'd hate to harm any one of you, but I'm here by full authority, and it's my sworn duty to hold and protect—"

The Sport from Hard Luck meant precisely what he said, but even a man of his undoubted abilities cannot guard four quarters at one and the same time, and so his speech came to an abrupt ending.

A wiry little knave had crept around to the rear under cover, and now rose up with a bit of heavy quartz in right hand. A pause to steady himself and make sure his aim, then the missile was flung with savage force and unerring skill.

Struck fairly upon the head, his skull saved from cracking only by the thick felt he wore, Hotspur Hal dropped his guns from unnerved fingers and sunk helplessly to the earth, the weapons both exploding as they struck beside him.

There was an instinctive scattering of the mob as one of their number gave a wild howl on catching a stray bullet; but then Dick Simpson surged forward with flourished rope, fairly roaring as he did so:

"Now we hev got 'im, boys! Hyar's the rope, an' thar's the durned galoot which—lynch him!"

That mad howl was instantly caught up by his fellows, and it really seemed as though the Sport from Hard Luck had run his earthly race to an ill ending; but then, with a wild howl and a mad screech, a ragged, disreputable-looking figure came rushing upon the scene, and dropping to his knees by the side of his senseless pard, Bummer Billy Bedad leveled a brace of revolvers, one of which covered the man with the rope.

"Drap that rope, ye houn'-dog! R'ar back, the rest o' ye all, or I'll blow a red lane clean through the heap if it's

my last doin' on this yer globe! Git, ye pizen critters, an' it's Bummer Billy Bedad that's axin' of ye to—git, I say!"

Boldly came that bluff, and the tramp seemed only too ready to make good his words by actions; but after all it was one man bucking against more than a score, all of them hard nuts to crack on an occasion like this.

Dick Simpson recoiled a bit, for one of those pistols was staring him full in the face, and reckless though the ruffian was, he had no burning desire to cross the divide by bullet express.

That recoil lasted but a few seconds, and as Simpson saw Bummer Billy covertly nudging Hotspur Hal with a knee as he held guard, his savage rage again flamed up, and as he edged a bit nearer with his noosed rope, he cried out to his fellows:

"Jump him, lads! He's only one, an' plum' skered to shoot whar he knows that'd mean shore hangin' when—now!"

Fancying he saw his chance, Simpson ducked head and squatted, then made a sidelong leap which he trusted would effectually foil those leveled weapons, after which 'twould be a comparatively easy matter to fall upon and fairly crush all opposition out of this tramp.

But a scheme which might have worked to a charm in the case of an ordinary tramp signally failed with Bummer Billy Bedad.

Swift as light that aim shifted to match, and as the pistol exploded a mad howl of mingled rage and pain broke from the burly ruffian.

His right hand dropped the rope, for the bones were terribly shattered by that heavy bullet, and Dick Simpson staggered back a cripple for the rest of his life.

The miners were coming with a rush which surely must have crushed out all opposition, but, that shot and accompanying scream of pain partly cowed the majority, while casting them all into confusion.

Then, as Simpson reeled back, shaking his bloody hand over his head in excess of pain, cursing and howling, more like a drunken lunatic than aught in sober senses, the miners fell back in disorder.

Even as they did so, Bummer Billy felt his pard give a sigh and stir, and knowing that recovery would be rapid now it had commenced, he pushed his bold bluff still further.

"The fust shot is to cripple, but all the rest means sure death, ye want to know, gents! Keep back, or I'll hev a he-ole boneyard started right hyar an' right—keep back, or pay penalty!"

Hotspur Hal struggled to rise just then, and Bummer Billy gave a hasty mutter of warning: he had time for nothing further, for a hoarse cry came from the rear, and he knew Saul Eden must be rallying from that pretty knock-down.

Casting a glance that way, Bedad saw the gambler rise and stagger his way like one drunken, and knowing now that the crisis had surely come, he took swift action.

With a cat-like leap he reached the Breakneck Sport and tripped him flat, holding him under a heavy foot as he again covered the startled crowd with his guns, crying forth in stern tones:

"Keep back, I tell ye, now! Try to crowd in an' I'll give ye what one gun holds, then blow this galoot's brains clean to never-come-back-ag'in with t'other!"

For one so heavily handicapped by odds, Bummer Billy was really making a magnificent bluff, and so Hotspur Hal began to realize as his brain cleared and his wits came back once more.

He secured the revolvers which had dropped from his unnerved fingers on receipt of that foul blow from behind, and not until he was actually rising to his feet did the enemy fully realize what was doing.

"Right hyar, pardy!" called out Bummer Billy, exultantly. "Shoulder to shoulder, an' we kin lick the hull town

to thunder! Right hyar, an'—hold fast to this yer cuss an' we've got 'em whar the wool's short!" he added in a tone which was meant for Arlington alone.

But Saul Eden caught the words, and readily divined their meaning, and as strong hands fairly jerked him to his feet again, he called out in a voice which was almost unrecognizable because of mad rage and chagrin:

"Jump 'em, boys! Never mind me, but kill like—"

A powerful grip closed upon his throat and cut short his mad words. The muzzle of a revolver touched his temple, and Bummer Billy cried out in stern warning to the irresolute crowd in front:

"Stiddy, thar! Off comes his ruff ef you even try to kick! Keep yer shirts on, an' we won't bite ye, but ef not—say your prayers, Eden!"

With the queer pards on either side, holding him powerless as to limbs, Saul Eden was forced backward in the direction of the drift out of which Bummer Billy Bedad had come so opportunely, and in their leaderless condition the miners would scarcely have taken action ere that refuge was won, only for the gambler himself.

Divining the truth, Saul Eden began to struggle, at the same time shouting at the top of his voice:

"Rush 'em, men! Down 'em at all hazards! Never mind me, for—"

It was a rush, but the gambler was himself the subject, and as the mouth of the drift was gained, Bummer Billy cried out to his comrade:

"Look to him, pardy, an' I'll hold the fort—just so!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEEDS OF A MADMAN.

Hobbling along with the aid of his stout canes, each rod of progress seeming a miracle when his grotesquely crippled state is taken into consideration, Crooked Esau drew nearer the Dikeman residence that bright morning.

Another marvel was that he should be here at such an early hour, so many miles away from his mountain shack.

Limping, hobbling, weaving unsteadily from side to side, the elder France persisted in his purpose, which was not only to reach that building, but to win an interview with Roger Dikeman.

Esau came from the hills rather than from the town itself, but from the number of glances cast in that direction, 'twould appear that he rather anticipated interruption from that quarter.

None such came, however, and at length the deplorable specimen of humanity reached the front of the house, steadying himself with one cane, while using its mate to rap upon the closed portal.

The boards beneath his feet were marked with blood, but Crooked Esau gave that no heed; his shaggy-browed eyes were fixed impatiently upon the door, from beyond which he could now hear light footfalls.

Roger Dikeman answered that summons, giving a little start and exclamation of surprise as he first glimpsed that early caller.

Mumbling something which, no doubt, was intended for a salutation, Esau France hobbled forward without waiting for further invitation, in spite of his condition, crossing the threshold before objection could be made, even had the proprietor felt so disposed.

"You wish to see me, sir?" asked the mine owner, recognizing this luckless being as one toward whom his attention had been called on several occasions in Breakneck, although they had never met face to face until right now.

"Yes, yes, I want to see—I want to know—that money, the poor gentleman lost when—he is not badly off, sir? not badly off, I hope?"

After his nervous fashion came these mixed-up queries and assertions, while those iron-shod supports quivered and rattled restlessly upon the hall floor.

Few could see this unfortunate creature without at the same time feeling strong compassion for his physical defects, and more than once of late Roger Dikeman had put an extra dollar or two in the way of the cripple's son, under pretense of purchasing of his mountain wares; but now that they were brought into actual contact, the mine owner could feel only intense repulsion.

If this being had been a human toad, the result could hardly have been different.

Attributing this mainly to his recent excitement, which had left his nerves unnaturally attuned, Dikeman choked back the feeling as much as possible, answering the cripple as best he could when Crooked Esau mourned the robbery and cruel assault.

"'Twas beneath my own roof-tree, one might say: my own roof-tree! I would have fought for the poor young gentleman—gentleman whom I never liked better than when he seemed the most unfortunate! Most unfortunate, poor, dear, luckless gentleman!"

Roger Dikeman gave back thanks for this sympathy on Crossley's behalf, saying that he would take pleasure in conveying the messages when Crossley was a little better able to receive them.

"Then he hasn't—it was all true, the amount of money which he lost? There were—how many thousands? Many thousands which the poor gentleman lost? Lost beneath my own—ah, how my heart bled for him, then! How my aching soul—eh? eh?"

More nervous the cripple appeared to grow, his canes fairly beating an irregular tattoo on the floor, his eyes glittering and glowing as if filled with living fire.

He seemed so sorely put about that the robbery should have taken place upon his own premises, that Mr. Dikeman offered relief in part.

"It would have been a heavy loss indeed, my dear sir, and one which we could but illy have afforded if the whole truth must be told."

"If? If? But, surely, you don't mean to say—was it all a lie, then?" almost fiercely croaked the cripple, as he swayed drunkenly on his feet the while.

"What do you mean by—all a lie, sir?" just a bit sternly demanded the mine owner.

"All a lie that—the money was not stolen, then? He told us—he was playing upon our sympathies when he swore—robbed?"

"Mr. Crossley is above playing any such part as you foolishly hint, Mr. France. The money was stolen, but 'twas restored—that is—"

Roger Dikeman broke off with a stammer, feeling that perhaps he had permitted indignation to get the upper hand of his prudence. But Crooked Esau caught quickly at the admission, speaking with husky swiftness:

"'Twas restored? 'Twas given back after—by whom? How and when and where—restored? The money was—tell me, sir; tell me by whom all those thousands were restored after—tell me—tell me!"

The mine owner shrunk back a bit at this almost frantic outburst, and, as though he recognized his own folly in betraying so much excitement, Esau France calmed down, speaking for the first time with even coherence.

"I humbly beg your pardon, Mr. Dikeman. I have been worrying over this ugly happening so constantly ever since that it has shaken my poor nerves until—but now I am calm and composed. You can see for yourself, sir; am I not perfectly sane?"

The mine owner was forced to admit as much, and Crooked Esau added:

"I am calm; calm and composed once more. My poor brain is so wondrously relieved that I could—if I may be permitted to see Mr. Crossley for a few seconds, sir?"

Without waiting for his desire to be granted, Crooked Esau hobbled toward

the stairs, and was actually ascending them before Mr. Dikeman fairly realized what was coming to pass.

Seeing that to refuse permission now would but add fresh trouble, and knowing how much stronger and in every way better Arthur was this morning, the mine owner contented himself with warning his queer guest against any undue excitement, following closely after the cripple in readiness to save Esau from falling in case of slip or trip.

But neither took place. France tucked canes in armpits, using his arms even more than his legs, mounting the stairs with remarkable ease and celerity for one in his lamentable condition.

As though posted in regard to conditions, Esau at once made for the chamber where Crossley had a bed, and as he entered that room, he gave a husky, barely articulate cry of recognition.

And then, before Mr. Dikeman could interfere, the cripple was fairly beside the bed, fiercely demanding full information as to that mysterious restitution of the stolen money.

"Who brought it, ye devil? How was it found when—tell me who played such an infernally foolish trick or I'll—hands off, I say!"

"Quiet, you crazy fool!" sternly cried Mr. Dikeman, as he grasped Crooked Esau and jerked him back from the bedside. "Quiet, or I'll throw you out as if you were—"

With a vicious howl the man of the mountains dropped his canes and twisted about to break from those strong hands, fairly gnashing his teeth as he recognized the man with whom he now had to do.

'Twas as though a mask had been torn from his face and his person as well. One moment a distorted, awkward cripple, the next instant a wild beast in full possession of every muscle, sinew and cord; a maniacal adversary who seemed far more devilish than human.

Shaking off those hands as a man might cast off a child, Esau France clatched with claw-like fingers at the astonished mine owner's throat, his free hand jerking forth a hidden revolver as he fairly shrieked:

"Ha, ye purblind fool! You black-hearted hound of Tophet! Do ye know me? Do you know me at last, Roger Dikeman?"

"God above!" gasped the mine owner as the bewildering truth seemed to flash over his brain. "You are—"

"I am David Gilson, and you are—die, you hound!"

But just as the maniacal caller seemed on the point of murdering his bewildered adversary, the chamber door was burst open and a lithe figure leaped upon the two men, flinging Dikeman aside and grappling with Crooked Esau, at the same time pantingly crying aloud:

"Father, you must not—oh, father!"

A muffled report, then the two men fell to the floor together.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BUMMER BILLY'S BLUFF MADE GOOD.

Just as that mad struggle between mine owner and supposed cripple began, Dr. James Green was making all haste toward the Dikeman residence, bearing startling tidings.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of Nathan France as the boyish-looking hunter and trapper rushed hastily into the house, and naturally supposed he was bearing much the same tidings.

But just as he gained the front entrance, Green caught the confused sounds of a furious struggle within, followed instantly by a gunshot, then a heavy fall which seemed to fairly shake the entire building.

He rushed with all haste to the scene, finding Roger Dikeman just separating father and son, both of whom appeared to be dead or dying!

As a professional man, Green at once took full charge of affairs, and in a remarkably short space of time he was

ready to express an off-hand opinion as to his patients.

For there were two more: father and son, Crooked Esau and Nathan France.

In that brief but desperate struggle the false cripple had been shot by his own weapon, held by his own hands, and after so falling in close grapple with the youngster, had whipped forth a long knife and cruelly cut the one whom he called son.

"They are both alive, and possibly may recover in the end, although I fear the old man is fated," tersely reported Dr. Green after that preliminary examination.

Crooked Esau was insensible, now, and past giving further trouble of the same sort; and now Roger Dikeman found time and opportunity for a close examination, scanning that face with strangely conflicting emotions.

And then, after doing a little more for his new patients, Dr. Green bethought himself of the tidings which he had set out to convey; that there was hot trouble at the Touchstone Mine, and brisk shooting going on between the strikers and the newly employed foreman.

"Of course it makes more work for men of my profession, but I'm sorry to hear it; sorry to have the good repute of our town so bitterly blighted, sir!" forcibly declared the man of healing, turning again to Nathan France.

This case offered him more hope by far. Though severely wounded, Dr. Green declared that Nathan would recover with half-luck, backed up by good nursing and skillful attendance.

"I'll answer for the last, while you see to the rest," he declared, with smiling earnestness, while looking up to Dikeman.

"Do all you can for them both, doctor," gravely said the mine owner, as he glanced again toward the elder patient. "I must hear that—he must speak, sensibly, before death claims his if your art can possibly bring about such a seeming miracle. You can? He will be able to talk with coherence, doctor?"

"I'll do my level best, as a matter of course. And now—where?"

But Roger Dikeman was already in swift motion, giving way to his perfectly natural anxiety concerning the safety of his mining property, to say nothing of his new foreman and the Hotspur's queer pard.

Dr. Green turned back to Nathan, who still pleaded for his father, begging that aid might be turned his way first, huskily declaring that the poor old man was wholly unaccountable for his deeds, since he had long been crazy; a veritable lunatic!

Meanwhile the word was spreading with rapidity, and by the time Roger Dikeman could reach town, all Breakneck was in an uproar over the Touchstone affair, some cheering for the lawless strikers, but more holding out against any such anarchistic actions.

This being the case, Roger Dikeman found it no difficult matter to collect a formidable bodyguard, with whom he hastened as directly as possible to the scene of trouble, finding the Saul Eden mob at bay, thanks to Bummer Billy's bold bluff, backed up by his revolvers.

Considerable powder had been burned, and more wounds than one given, although no lives had been lost so far.

With such a strong force to back him up, Roger Dikeman was but a few minutes winning a truce, and then he hurried over to the drift, at the mouth of which he found the queer pards, neither of whom had been materially injured, although Hotspur Hal bore a "swelled head" in consequence of that foul stroke from behind his back.

Saul Eden was bound hand and foot, pale with rage, and fairly frothing at the mouth as he demanded his liberty; but Bummer Billy quickly vetoed that.

"Not while I can pick trigger or play steel, gentlemen, all! This man is my game, legally put under arrest, and I am—"

"Who are you, then?"

"Bummer Billy Bedad, from Tougher Luck!" declared the tramp detective, with a half malicious grin at those curious witnesses.

Saul Eden burst into a torrent of oaths and savage revilings at this, vainly striving to burst his bonds, and at the same time calling on his friends to rescue him from those hounds.

Dark looks were showing, and ugly mutterings were becoming audible before Bummer Billy saw fit to take the hint; but then he spoke out in tones and words which none who heard could possibly mistake.

"Touch lightly, gentlemen, if you please," he cried, stepping a bit to the front, with revolver in each hand, dropping all dialect for the time being.

"I am a detective, duly authorized to act as such in every State of this Union. I have arrested this man, whom you have known only as Saul Eden, for bank-robbery and safe-blowing, back East.

The prisoner yelled forth a mad denial, but Bummer Billy persisted.

"There are more counts than one on the docket against him, but the heaviest and blackest is what I just said; for, in turning that trick, this Saul Eden—to give him the name by which you know him best—added murder to his foul record."

Again the accused broke in, using language so awfully foul that in self-defense Hotspur Hal forced a gag between his foam-marked jaws.

By this time the crowd, now amounting to a small army so far as numbers went, had pretty well simmered down.

For one thing, those who were most inclined to make serious trouble were now entirely leaderless.

Saul Eden was a captive in bonds. Dick Simpson had skulked away with crippled hand, all the fight knocked out of his huge carcass by that stinging wound.

Still, there was peril of no mean dimensions in case one of their number should spring to the front with a rallying cry, and fully realizing as much, the Sport from Hard Luck stepped forward, lifting hand by way of commanding attention.

"Gentlemen, there may still be some of you who fancy this man, Saul Eden, as he has figured here in your midst, has received rather more than his fitting reward. Now—let me ask one favor.

"All those to whom the Touchstone workings owes money for labor or supplies please step aside from the rest."

A brief hesitation, then obedience. And Roger Dikeman stared in mute amaze as he recognized nearly every workman employed by him.

Then Hotspur Hal resumed in clear, cool tones:

"Now, gentlemen, I have faith in each and every one of you. Rough a few of you may be, but tough—never! I know that not a man among you would put in a false claim, just because you fancied it might possibly pass scrutiny. I feel that each and every one of you honestly believe you are lawful creditors—"

"We kin prove it, too! Thar's ole Dikeman, which is too bloody hard-livered fer ary sort o' use! Ax him ef he don't owe us, then!"

"Wait a bit, please. If money is owing to you, that money shall be paid in solid cash this very day. Only—Saul Eden swore up and down that he had bought up your claims against the Touchstone property, paying you a dollar for every dollar's worth, and that you were—"

Hotspur Hal left that sentence unfinished, for 'twas worse than useless to attempt speech against such a howl of savage rage and denial as now burst from those miners.

They swore that not a dollar had been paid them, and believing that the gambler had fairly defrauded them, the cry for his lynching was lifted in savage earnest, and a rush began; only to recoil as Bummer Billy Bedad jumped to the front once more, revolvers at a level and voice crying in wonderfully business-like tones:

"Back, all! I'll kill him with my last pill, and give you the other eleven!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRAMP DETECTIVE'S REVELATION.

Clearly the tramp detective meant all he said, but before even the hottest-headed among them all could put him to the test, Hotspur and a number of others took much the same stand, resolved to uphold the law as represented by Bummer Billy Bedad.

There is a bare chance that, even if Saul Eden had been able to make another of his fierce appeals, some of his adherents might have risked all in one desperate rush; but, lacking any such incitement, the men drew back and the trouble was quelled.

Still, Bedad could not feel entirely at ease with his important capture so long as they were out in the open, and acting on his whispered suggestion, Mr. Dikeman quickly arranged with his particular guards to act as escort for the little party back to his residence.

In order to make that trip with as little bother as might be, Saul Eden was placed upon his feet, from which bonds had been removed, Bummer Billy gripping one of those securely fettered arms and whispering in lowered tones to his human quarry:

"It's just like this, my pretty fellow. My warrant reads dead or alive. I'll make it the last if you're agreeable, but it'll surely be the other if you give too much trouble. I'll kill you without mercy if I see the least chance of your breaking away, or of being rescued by any of your pals; that is sworn to, by all that's good and evil!"

Saul Eden was staring directly into those eyes the while, and he could not mistake the truth: Bummer Billy meant "business" now.

Fortunately for all concerned, therefore, no serious trouble arose while Saul Eden was being conducted to the Dikeman residence; and when once within doors, the tramp detective threw off his grim restraint, once more the careless, reckless, trampish individual for the moment.

Dr. Green was still in charge, and from him the state of home affairs was quickly learned.

Crooked Esau, or David Gilson, to give him the name which belonged by rights to the imposter, was in a very bad way, his injury clearly mortal, although he might linger for hours ere death should close accounts.

On the other hand, Nathan France was rallying remarkably, and there was little to be feared on his account, while Arthur Crossley was even more than doing his doctor proud!

Having secured his man beyond all chance of escape unaided, the detective who had so far figured as Bummer Billy Bedad, let drop a hint to the Hotspur which resulted in gathering a select audience before whom he proposed to make a more or less interesting revelation.

At first that seance was intended to take place in the little home office on the ground floor, but Arlington proposed an amendment.

"Crossley is about as deeply interested in the matter as the next fellow, Billy, and he'd rather have it from your lips than second-hand."

"If you reckon it wouldn't stir him up too much, Hal?"

The Sport from Hard Luck promptly negated that idea, and so it came to pass that the tramp detective made his revelation there in the sick chamber, the floor of which was still damp with the blood of two other human beings.

As one of the prominent characters, Saul Eden was present, seated in a chair, his wrists encircled by steel cuffs, his arms behind his back with a stout cord connecting his elbows.

Standing behind this occupied chair, one hand resting lightly on one shoulder of his sullen prisoner, Bummer Billy Bedad began speaking.

"I'm not going to bother you with ancient history, my good friends, nor yet give in detail all the crimes which are recorded against this remarkably fine specimen of—inhumanity!"

"Enough on that point if I say, what is gospel truth, that the fellow you have known thus far as Saul Eden is surely booked for conviction, and that conviction can only end in a trip to the gallows!"

The prisoner gave a surly curse at this blunt prediction, but that light hand closed firmly and a muttered warning quieted the criminal for the time being.

"Let so much suffice for the past and for other climes. Now, just listen a bit and I'll tell you how mighty busy this enterprising gentleman has been right here in your own midst."

"Ever since striking Breakneck, Saul has lived crooked, because that is his nature; if given equal reward, he'd far rather elect the evil than the good."

"Still, so far as the facts have come to light, it was not until something like a year ago that Eden fairly set up in life as a road-agent and footpad, and since then he has made a record more interesting than reputable."

"You lie—lie like a dog!" fiercely snarled the prisoner, turning head and viciously trying to sink teeth into that strong hand as it rested upon his shoulder.

Even more swiftly that hand turned to a fist, hard as stone and so heavy that the villain's head went back, teeth loosened, lip cut and mouth bleeding freely.

The tramp detective said nothing while doing this, and just as though everything was progressing smooth as velvet, he spoke on:

"He seemed to hold a special spite against you, Mr. Dikeman, for he it was who, backed by a picked gang from town, robbed you of large sums on two different occasions. And if that couple was not made a trio, you surely can't blame Mr. Saul Eden!"

"You were in the right, Crossley, when you declared your belief that Eden was at the bottom of your trouble in the hills, yonder, while trying to run the gantlet with a supply of cash; for Saul set the trap you so nearly fell a victim to, and Dick Simpson, one of the Touchstone miners, posted his as to the money you were fetching this way."

"A lie—all an infernal lie!" sullenly vowed the prisoner, only to have the tramp detective grip his neck until speech was fairly impossible.

"A true indictment, as I stand prepared to prove from start to finish," coolly assured Bummer Billy. "There was another finger in the pudding that night: Crooked Esau played his part, as will be made clear later on; but the one who kicked up the biggest racket was Saul Eden."

"When Saul missed his cue in that direction, finally learning right here that the money had come safely to hand after some as yet unexplained fashion, he took another and scarcely less desperate course."

"You all know what trouble Mr. Dikeman has had on account of his Touchstone mine. The county records were destroyed, by accidental fire as the common belief goes, but I have fair proof that fire was incendiary, and almost certainly caused by or through Saul Eden."

"Knowing that the original title deeds were lost or stolen, the rest seemed easy to such an ingenious knave, particularly since the turning up of the discoverer, Rough House, who sold his claim to Mr. Dikeman."

"It was easy enough to bribe and buy House, soul and body, and Saul has since put him to various uses, among them the insulting Miss Dikeman so he could play hero, and, only last night, to play burglar and—"

Again Saul Eden interrupted the proceedings by a savage outburst, this time causing the tramp detective more trouble ere he could fairly subdue his refractory prisoner.

When this was effected, Bummer Billy cut the rest short, saying:

"What I've said I can prove by Rough House himself. He was the man who caught one of Crossley's bullets, last night, and Dick Simpson was his running mate. Big Dick helped Rough to the Touchstone, leaving him in yonder as about the safest place until other arrangements might be made. And right there I stumbled upon the pretty lad, so badly hurt as to be pliable as wax in my hands!"

Again Saul Eden denounced it all as an infamous concoction of malicious lies, and again the detective silenced him, to add:

"I'll give you a perfectly square deal, my man. I'll fetch you two rascals face to face, and then let the best man win out. After all it can make mighty little difference to you or to your fate, old fellow: that is settled beforehand, I'm delighted to assure you!"

Having performed all that he promised for the moment, Bummer Billy removed his prisoner to the ground floor, there looking closely to his fastenings like one determined to take no chances which prudence might avert, after which he elected a sufficient escort from among the curious citizens who had flocked to that center of interest, eager to learn all that might be upon the tapis.

Then he hurried away to bring back his crippled game, Rough House.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CROOKED CROOK CONFESSES.

Almost from the start Dr. Green was convinced that not an earthly ray of hope remained for Esau France to recover from that gunshot wound, but not until he found himself sinking rapidly would the injured man believe as much.

When conviction came at last, his iron nerve seemed to break down all at once, and among the broken ravings which crossed his lips the man of medicine caught something which induced him to seek out the mine owner, speaking earnestly:

"There is something burdening my patient's mind, Mr. Dikeman, which I believe you ought to know. If you could—eh?"

The old gentleman gave a low exclamation, shrinking back with a shiver of mingled hatred and repulsion.

Dr. Green saw this, and could not well mistake its meaning.

"Of course I have no intention to dictate, my dear sir," he hastened to assure. "I merely thought that, possibly, you might set the poor devil a little more at ease. And—he is sinking rapidly! I do not believe he can possibly live the day out."

A brief hesitation, then Roger Dikeman rallied, bowing head as he motioned the doctor to lead the way back to the apartment which had been allotted to the wounded cripple.

This was done in silence, and when he saw the mine owner standing beside the bed whereon rested the man from the mountains, face grave and troubled, hands clasped tightly behind his back as though fearful of trusting himself too far, the physician began to realize something of the truth; that these men had known each other in the long ago.

An uneasy stir on his part called the patient's notice that way, and with a feeble gesture Esau France brought the doctor to his side.

"Am I—the whole truth, doctor!" huskily spoke he who had for so long a time maintained such a wondrous imposture.

"You are seriously injured, my dear sir, but while there is life there is hope," answered Dr. Green, gravely.

"No, no! the truth—whole truth!" with an angry shake of his head. "Will I—can I live—through this?"

A brief hesitation, then the doctor shook his head, silently.

"How long—can I live until—a week?"

"No. I must tell you—since you ask it,

sir, I must say that you will not live beyond the day, if even that long," reluctantly yet positively answered the man of medicine.

Those eager eyes closed. That figure shivered. Something like a moan came through those parted lips. But the wounded man rallied anew, speaking distinctly:

"Go, then, please. I must—I have much to say which—leave me alone with—Roger Dikeman."

Dr. Green waited to make sure he had not mistaken the meaning of his patient, then yielded to his desire for privacy, whispering a few directions to the mine owner as he passed from the death chamber, for such he knew it to be now.

It was not until long after that the whole story came out, and even then there may have been a few points which Roger Dikeman kept fast-locked within his own breast for the remainder of his life.

There was much said on either side which would hardly interest the general reader, and so the main facts alone need be given in this connection.

In the days long gone Roger Dikeman and David Gilson had been rivals in love as in many other respects. Fortune favored the first-named, and shortly afterward his defeated rival disappeared from that neighborhood, as most people supposed forever.

Instead, David Gilson was meditating vengeance because of, as he both declared and believed, the foul dealing to which he had fallen victim.

Time and again he swore that Dikeman had won a wife through devilish lies; times past counting he vowed to play even if it sent him to a shameful death upon the gallows.

From under cover Gilson strove to sow dissension between the pair, but all his arts failed. Then, grown madly desperate, he watched his chance when Dikeman was absent from home on important business, and finding Mrs. Dikeman alone with one of her children, lured her from that comparatively safe refuge by cunning lies, then threw off the mask and tried to force her to run away with him.

The wife resisted, desperately, and in the struggle which followed, was accidentally killed—now, lying upon his death-bed, the criminal vowed that this was truth.

"I would far sooner have yielded up my own life!" he declared, lent strength by pure excitement. "I loved her better far than—"

"Silence!" cried Roger Dikeman, hoarsely, one hand slipping over the lips which seemed to profane that memory.

But, in the end, Gilson had his way, little by little tearing the mask from over the sad past, listened to by his one-time rival in love like one in a dizzy dream.

Up to this day Roger Dikeman had believed his beloved wife false to her vows, false to herself, to him, to her twin children. But now—

"I killed and buried her, then fled with the child—her child—and he is—he restored the money I stole from Crossley! He is my boy Nathan—your son—her child!"

So the clouds all cleared away long before the sun went down that evening, when David Gilson quietly dropped off into his last, long sleep, no longer the fugitive, the cripple, the heavily bearded "Joram Wheatcroft," who first failed to rob Arthur Crossley, then came to his aid in time to foil the second assault of Saul Eden and his paid tools, and ended all by guiding the trio toward the mountain shack, himself crossing the gulch afoot in time to resume his identity as Crooked Esau!

All this was made known, together with the confession of the badly, yet not fatally injured Rough House. That confession cleared away all remaining doubts, for that rascal made a clean breast of it.

Saul Eden hired him to do his "dirty work," and this was his final reward!

Having confessed to the burglary, the assault upon Phyllis through directions

from Saul Eden, who wished to play the gallant knight in defense of fair lady, Rough House signed a positive statement that he had been fully paid for all his rights to the Touchstone property, then was sent over to Breakneck, to be cared for until able to leave that part of the country.

Long before this the tramp detective had taken his valuable prisoner away to meet his just deserts in the far east, but before leaving making fair apology for playing such a role. Even Hotspur Hal had only suspected the truth. They had met by chance, and traveled together for lack of better company.

The Sport from Hard Luck was just what he claimed to be—a "Sport," pure and simple. And when this little episode in an eventful life drew to a natural close, Hotspur passed on to fresh pastures whither—well, it is barely possible that we may yet follow him thither!

Before dying, David Gilson made Nathan understand the facts of his birth and relationship, and long ere the young man recovered fully from his hurt, he learned to love both father and twin sister.

Only once did he revert to that sad time; then he told how he restored the package of money stolen by his supposed father, of whose imposture he was aware, but whom he felt fully assured was wholly unaccountable for his actions, through insanity.

And Arthur Crossley?

Met with his befitting reward! Recovered from his hurts, he married fair Phyllis Dikeman, then resumed the position of foreman to the Touchstone, which he so developed that it was, eventually, sold to a mining syndicate for an immense sum.

And with this sum to back them, the party left Breakneck, turning their faces toward the rising sun in quest of a new and more congenial home.

THE END.

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